Tsukumodo Volume 4

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Tsukumodo:Volume_4

付喪堂骨董店

不思議取り扱います

4

御堂彰彦

イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

電撃文庫

付喪堂骨董店
不思議取り扱います
4
御堂彰彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

第一章 影 11

第二章 ギャンブル 93

第三章 小指 184

第四章 秘密 263

contents

Designed by Toru Suzuki

In our world there are objects called 'Relics'.

Not antiques or objects of classical art, no: they can be tools with special powers created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers after long exposure.

For instance: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you'll look in the future, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things, as they appear in countless fairy tales and rumors.

Most people consider *Relics* mere fantasies because they have never come across any. Even if a Relic were right before their eyes, they'd fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they'd dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some remain unconcerned, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

Regrettably, Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.

Chapter 1 - Shadow

There are people with subdued personalities who do not emit much of a presence and keep a low profile. In many cases, they are negative thinkers, introverts or lone wolves.

There tends to be at least one of them in every class. They're the poor devils who get forgotten and left behind on school trips.

However, a negative personality does not automatically weaken your presence; I know someone who's far from being cheerful, doesn't talk much and always keeps a straight face, and yet she somehow manages to make herself felt.

I would notice instantly if she wasn't around—because she's never far from me.

They would often call me a "shadow" behind my back because my weak presence—although you could actually drop the "behind my back" since I heard them talking—and when they noticed me, they would walk away, embarrassed, blaming me for not making my presence felt on their leave.

However, they didn't bear me ill will; it was just a plain fact they stated. To me, it was not at all rare to be forgotten during roll calls, or to be skipped when it was really my turn to solve a problem, or to be the one who was left after the last exercise sheet had been distributed.

That being said, it's not like I didn't feel anything when that happened. On such days, I would always be haunted by the wish to vanish into thin air.

If I'm only bothering people with my hardly noticeable presence, then I would rather just disappear entirely. I would tell myself. *If my become more and more unnoticeable, maybe I'll eventually disappear like a shadow?*

Of course not.

Therefore, I would go to the art room on such days and squat in a corner without turning on the lights. The darkness of the room erased my presence, my shadow, entirely; there I could disappear.

There I could relax. Only then could I really feel at peace of mind.

I didn't like lit places; because they made even a shadow as thin as mine stand out when I really wanted to hide in the dark.

I wanted to disappear, to melt into the shadows. So that everyone could keep on taking no heed of me.

Because my parents were at home on Sundays, it was my routine to go shopping then. Not because I wanted to give them some peace from their jobs but because I wasn't alone at home; the complaints they made when they told me to clean my room and the sound they produced when they cleaned the house would unsettle me. It was not the noise; it was the sheer presence of other people around me that made me feel cramped .

Therefore I would go outside. Alone, of course.

I hated crowds but I wasn't too bothered by them because there were only strangers in them. However, in order to avoid coming across someone I did know, I tended to take side alleys with few people around. I especially liked the shadowy spaces between two buildings. Every so often I would find delinquents in such places, but they always ignored me thanks to my weak presence.

It was on such a day in such a shadowy street that, while thinking these things, I came across a small, stagnant shop. It was clear at a glance that business wasn't thriving.

Its resemblance to myself in the sense of being hidden and ignored caught my interest. I entered the shop.

There were a lot of curious, clearly one-of-a-kind things on the shelves of that shop: a European doll, porcelain tableware, an old wall clock, and so on. I assumed it was an antique shop. I certainly didn't dislike this kind of store.

"Welcome," the saleswoman shortly said while sitting still behind the counter. She was breathtakingly beautiful; her presence cloaked this place in a veil of fantasy.

To be honest, her presence was a tad too strong for my taste.

"Are you looking for something specific?"

"Um... maybe something accessory-like?"

"So an accessory it is?"

"Yes, I suppose... one that doesn't attract any attention if possible."

While I had only made that request on the spur of the moment indeed, I wasn't averse to wearing an accessory. But because I didn't want to stand out, I didn't like gaudy things.

Suddenly, something on the shelves caught my eye.

I had noticed two small, oval glass phials. There were little lobe-like handles attached on both sides and a protruding lid on each of them. They looked almost the same with the exception of one being transparent and one being black.

Something about their subtlety attracted me; I picked them up and examined them from different angles. Looking through the glass I noticed that there was powder inside. I tried opening the lid and confirmed that it was powdered paint.

"You can have one of them," suggested the shop assistant as she took note of my interest.

"Only one?" *I would like both, but I guess their limited in number*.

"Which do you choose?"

Wavering back and forth, my hand alternated between the two phials. I grasped at the transparent bottle, changed my mind and grasped at the black one instead, only to return my hand to its former position again, after which I switched to the black one yet again.

"So you choose this one."

In the end, I chose the transparent phial.

"The Relic named 'Shadow.'"

"Relic...?"

"Note that by 'Relic' I don't mean antiques or art objects . ' Relic' is the word we use for tools with special capabilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or for objects that have absorbed their owner's grudge or natural spiritual powers.

"You've probably heard of it before: things like a stone that brings ill luck, or a cursed voodoo doll or a triple mirror that shows how you are going to die. The Shadow Relic is one of them."

"'Shadow'..."

Its name was "Shadow" despite being transparent. While struggling against the urge to ask about the black one, I exchanged the cash I had for the transparent phial.

"This Relic, Shadow, allows you to weaken your presence."

"Hm?"

"That's the special power it bears."

Is this one of those fishy charms or mojos? I thought at first, but if it was true, then it was a perfect match for me, since I felt uncomfortably in this world and wanted to disappear.

"It lies in our nature to contradict ourselves. It seems to me, however, that this tendency is relatively strong in you. This Relic will fulfill your desire in a sense, but it will not in another sense."

After saying so, she opened the phial I had bought and scattered some of its content in the air around her.

Before I knew it, I was alone and walking along a main street.

By the time I arrived at home, the neat shop and the pretty saleswoman had completely slipped my mind and, as contradicting as it sounds, had been degraded to a "lasting impression without any specifics."

And the fainter my memory of the woman became, the stronger my faith in Shadow grew.

This powder will dim your very existence—

Even though I'd forgotten her face and appearance, I could

vividly remember the purpose of the phial I'd bought. As I gazed at my transparent purchase, the last thing she'd said to me crossed my mind.

She'd given me a warning, which was the single last thing that kept me here.

"Be careful: if you dim your existence too often, you will disappear altogether!"

If she was saying the truth, then this was a tempting opportunity to escape from this world—

"Sleep here tonight."

It was eight o'clock and we had just closed the shop. The shop owner, Towako Settsu, was elsewhere once again making her purchases.

I, Tokiya Kurusu, and Saki Maino were all alone.

I was about to call it a day and leave, when she suddenly grabbed me by the sleeve and made that request with an upward glance.

—But there was nothing exciting about it.

"Strange noise?" I countered with doubts showing on my face.

That was the dubious truth behind Saki's meaningful words, "sleep here tonight." Not that I had gotten my hopes up, of course.

The dated, small shop where we worked at, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, was indeed located in some back alley and had something of a haunted mansion about it, but that was not reason enough to just nod and buy her story.

"I'm sure it's just the wind," I suggested.

"I also thought so at first, but there was no wind yesterday."

"Maybe it's a cat?"

"The noise I heard was no meowing."

"A burglar?"

"Everything is still where it belongs," she denied.

"You sure about that? Did you look closely where the sound came from?"

"Fairly."

"Which leaves..."

I was stumped. In the case of an apartment or a flat, that kind of noise could originate from above or besides—from other inhabitants—but there lived no one else in this house.

"...it might be a ghost..." speculated Saki with an even voice and an expressionless face.

"It might be *what*?" I groaned.

"As I said, a... ghost," she repeated with the exact same face.

Eh? Is she serious now?

Saki had ashy, mid-back length hair that shimmered like silver when exposed to light, and delicate, pale skin. In contrast to these features, the clothes she wore—a black shirt, a black skirt, a pair of black boots—were all her favorite color: pitch black.

A much more defining feature of hers, however, was the fact that her feelings didn't show on her face. She always kept a straight face. Her jokes were never accompanied with a smile, which made it hard to recognize them.

"Um, just to make sure: are you serious?"

"Why would I joke about something like this?"

*I don't know how you **can't** be joking about this*, I thought but decided not to share my thoughts.

"I... I don't know how to serve a ghost client."

I'm fairly sure that ghosts don't usually come as clients! That aside, I don't know how to serve them either. And I don't

care, for what it's worth, I thought, tearing apart her statement in my mind, but then stopped since I could go on endlessly.

That aside, it seemed like even a self-proclaimed customer-service prodigy like Saki didn't presume to serve a ghost. Well, her talent couldn't really shine with normal people, either. Whether or not her customer service was to blame, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop was always empty.

"I guess we should be grateful even if our customers were ghosts."

"No, the customer is king!" Saki countered.

"You're missing my point..."

At any rate, I had no reason to deny her story about the noise she'd heard, so I was willing to give her hand in dealing with that problem. After all, if there really was a burglar or something, he had to be dealt with.

(*Thump*)

Suddenly, we both winced at an unexpected thump. Of course, I didn't suspect a ghost, but the noise did take

me by surprise. Not that I had doubted her, but Saki had told the truth.

"I'll take a look," I said as I stood up and turned the way the sound came from, when Saki tugged my sleeve. "Hm?"

"...I'm coming with you."

Saki was curious, too, it seemed, and didn't want to leave the matter to me. Still grasping my sleeve, she followed after me.

Part of the first floor and the entire second floor were private and belonged to Towako-san. The noise seemed to originate from the storage room that was located at the end of the first floor and was used to store something certain: Relics.

Not antiques or objects of classical art. They can be tools with special powers created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers after long exposure.

They appear in tales and legends: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you'll look in the future, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things, but most people consider Relics mere fantasies because they have never come across any. Even if a Relic were right before their eyes, they'd fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they'd dismiss it as a coincidence.

However, Relics are more common than people think.

In fact, I had just recently gotten myself entangled in incidents that involved a chest that would preserve its contents as-is, a key that would breathe life into inanimate puppets, and a incense burner that would let you control your dreams.

Because of the nature of its contents, the storage room was always locked; not even Saki and I were allowed to enter. Needless to say, outsiders had no chance of being granted access.

Saki and I observantly sneaked toward the door to the storage room. There was no sign of life on the way, but once we arrived there, we sensed someone.

Someone was on the other side.

I gingerly pressed my ear against the door and listened closely. There was no sound. But while there was no sound, I could clearly sense someone.

I grasped the doorknob and shuddered for an instant at its chilly touch. Just when I'd made up my mind and was about to push open the door—

(*Thump*)

I heard some noise from inside.

The best action to take would have been stepping back , considering the possibility that the culprit might come rushing out of the room, but I was so overwhelmed by surprise that I couldn't move from the spot.

However, the door stayed closed.

The fact that something was inside remained unchanged, however, and therefore I once again grabbed the door handle.

There was a click as I turned the doorknob; the door had been unlocked. The only thing left was to push it open.

With my eyes I signalized Saki to step back, but she stayed close to me regardless.

There's no time to waste.

I took a deep breath and—smashed the door open.

Nothing happened.

After briefly making eye contact with Saki, I entered the room. Naturally it was pitch-dark inside and I couldn't see a thing. My attempt to grope for the light switch proved fruitless as well.

Suddenly, something entered the corner of my eye from a blind spot behind the door.

—It might be a ghost...

Slightly before I could gasp at the memory of Saki's words—

"KYAAAAAA!"

—a scream split the air behind me.

"Well folks, hahaha! Here I was looking for a Relic and then I got buried under a pile of things! Oh boy, I thought I was done for."

In the end, the truth behind the ghost turned out to be Towako-san who had gotten back without our knowledge. Even though her straight waist-length black hair and her jacket and trousers had gotten all dusty because of her fall, she didn't seem to care in the least.

"OK, and what is it that you were looking for?" I asked .

"Oh, you know, 'was just looking if I could find the counterpart of the new Relic I purchased," answered Towako-san as she placed a black phial on the table. " This one here's called 'Light'. It will strengthen your impression on others if you put on the paint inside."

"Um, so it's varnish?"

"I'm not talking about some glossy coating!" she quickly shouted out in response to my mumbled remark.

"So what's its counterpart?"

"Well, in fact there's a phial with the same shape—but transparent—that in turn can weaken someone's impression. That would be this here, called 'Shadow,'" she explained and placed a transparent phial, Shadow, next to the black one, Light. Inside them there seemed to be powdered paint.

The bottles were equally shaped with different colors, but their characteristics and names were opposing, being in a relationship of yin and yang.

"But then, is it real this time?"

I figured that at least Shadow had to be real, seeing how it was kept in this storage room, but I didn't know about the new one.

At a glance, both phials looked exactly the same, except for their colors.

Then, spontaneously, Saki reached out for the two phials and, without any hesitation and any time to intervene, she opened their respective lids and put some of their powder on her hand. She then brought her face closer to the black and white powder and, for whatever reason, just licked it up.

Her verdict:

"It's salt and pepper."

And thus it was that seasoning found its way into the sortiment of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. You're cordially invited to the opening of the Tsukumodo Grocery Store. Not.

Obviously, Saki hadn't discovered two Relics called Salt and Pepper respectively, but merely found out that those phials were fake. In fact, Towako-san was twofoldly shocked to learn that even the supposedly real Shadow was fake.

"Man, why am I just so hapless?" Towako-san groaned as she slumped on the desk.

"You're lucky that you didn't end up buried under Relics," I countered to cheer her up.

Apparently recalling that scene, Towako-san raised her head. "Thinking back, where did that scream come from?"

I just silently turned my head to the side where Saki stood in response, and Saki turned her head to her side as well.

Of course, she didn't get through with that.

Yes: That scream from behind had been Saki's. I hadn't at all expected her to act like that when scared; it was above and beyond all my expectations, actually.

She wasn't joking when she speculated about ghosts but afraid; she wasn't indifferent when she kept a straight face all the time but just couldn't express her fear ; she wasn't just talking idly when she insisted on coming with me to the storage room and having me stay for the night but genuinely didn't want to be left alone.

Besides, the initial cause for her getting the idea of a ghost was me, because I had told her a ghost story.

Rumors about a ghost had recently emerged at our school because several students claimed to have seen one near the evening. Over the course of the past few days, the number of reported sightings had risen to more than 10.

According to them, the ghost girl, clad in the local school uniform, would just stand there staring at them just to vanish when they noticed her stare and turned around. In the beginning, the consent was that they had just mistaken a student for a ghost, but the likelihood of this theory dropped with the growing number of sightings.

Because the ghost was said to wear a school uniform, the place was filled with all kinds of silly theories; for instance, some were convinced that she was the straying soul of a school girl who could not ascend to heaven after committing suicide some decades ago, while others claimed that she had died in a car accident on her way to the opening ceremony and was since restlessly looking for her classroom, unaware of the fact that she was dead.

There was, alas, no record of such a suicide, nor was there a student meeting with an accident right before an opening ceremony, but when teachers presented this argument to their students, they came up with new conspiracies, revolving around the possibility that the school was hiding the facts or that the girl was holding a grudge against them because her misfortune had gone unnoticed.

I was expecting the fuss to eventually subside in due time, and because I was bored I'd told Saki about all this. I *was* a bit surprised at how attentively she'd listened to me, but I'd falsely thought that she was serious—not scared.

I hadn't known that Saki was so scared of ghosts. If anything, I would have imagined that she would be like " So what?" when confronted with one.

"I'm *so* going to tell her more tomorrow," I whispered with a broad grin on my way home.

Moments later, however, I stood thunderstruck before the entrance to my apartment.

"I forgot my keys..."

I tried patting my pockets, but my key case wasn't there. I also took a look into my wallet, but it wasn't there either.

Then I recalled where I'd left it.

"...At school."

"Oh boy..." I sighed as I stood before the unlit school building.

We'd had PE that day. Because the classroom was left unattended during PE, we would usually deposit our valuables in the PE teacher's room so that they were safe. As such, I deposited my wallet, my cell and my keys, which I seemed to have forgotten there.

"Man, why did nobody notice...?"

It boggles my mind that I've come to school twice a day, I thought to myself. Had I only forgotten my wallet, I would have retrieved it the following day, but without my keys I could not enter my room. The manager of my apartment lived elsewhere, which is why I could not ask him for a duplicate key. I'd had no other choice.

"But still, I gotta say..."

Sneaking into school at the very same night that we talked about horror stories? Sounds like a bad joke to me. I must have been born under a bad star.

I passed the entrance gate and walked across the school grounds.

The time was 10 pm, so there were no students on the school grounds anymore. However, judging by the lights I could see at the gym, there still seemed to be people doing their club activities. *Quite the hard-workers, eh?* I thought, but I was grateful because thanks to them the entry was still open.

I pushed the entrance door open and changed into my indoor shoes. Unsurprisingly, there were no people in the corridors and the classrooms, nor were they lit. The only light came from the emergency exit signs that were shining weakly. My shadow was projected largely onto the wall.

It was not the first time I'd been at school at night, but I still felt like I had become lost in a miraculous different world.

I wouldn't be surprised to see one or the other ghost hovering around here, I thought.

After I had crossed the corridor, I entered the passage that went on to the building that contained the rooms for special classes. The gym was there, too. Since the gym

was lit, I assumed that there was someone in the PE teacher's room, but the room was unlit. I guessed that the teacher who was still here was over in the gym itself.

For a moment, I pondered if I should go there and ask for permission, but in the end I couldn't be bothered to.

"Excuse me!" I said in a deliberately loud voice and entered the room. I turned on the light and opened the locker with our class's valuables and found my key case. It was mine, no doubt.

I took it out from there and left the room again. Eager to get home as fast as possible, I crossed the passage connecting the two buildings and tried to open the door to the general purpose building. I clicked my tongue.

The door was locked.

Apparently, the janitor had come and locked the door during the short while I was away.

Dang, how do I get to my shoes now?

Of course, I could still go home with my indoor shoes, but I really didn't want to do that. I also couldn't be bothered to go all the way to the janitorial room and ask them to open the door for me.

I hurried back to the other building and went upstairs, hoping that the passage in the 2nd floor was still open.

However, unfortunately the door was locked, too.

"This is getting better and better..."

At this rate, the door on the next floor is probably locked as well.

"Maybe I'll have more luck on the other side."

The two school buildings were built next to each other and connected by passages on the north side and the south side. The south doors were closed, but the ones in the north might still be open.

I dashed off and ran across the corridor.

The sound of my hasty steps reverberated at the walls as I ran, underscored tremendously by the silence that dominated the school building.

I had to admit that I was getting a tiny weeny bit frightened. I would have been entirely OK if there was someone else around, but the fact that I was all alone made me antsy.

When I walked past the technical library, the home ec room and the calligraphy room, I grew thankful that the laboratory wasn't on the way and that I didn't have to shake off delusions of human anatomy dolls charging at me.

Next, I came by the music room, but it seemed like the renowned musicians exhibited in the portraits on the wall did not mysteriously play the piano when the night closed in; there was nothing to be heard.

In the end, I walked past the art room, and it seemed like I could do so without being attacked by the fine lady in the painting.

However, I had to stop when suddenly a painting caught my eye.

Neither was it painted by a famous artist nor was it a copy thereof; it was just a painting made by another student, but for some reason it stood out from the other paintings hung on the wall.

After a few steps, however, I suddenly noticed that there was a girl standing right next to that picture. I was sure that she hadn't stood there a moment ago: she had appeared completely out of the blue.

What is she doing here at this late hour? I thought to myself as I desperately tried to suppress the word that came to mind for her. It was then that she turned around, noticing my glance, and our eyes met. I wanted to say something but my throat felt constricted and kept me from using my voice.

After we had stared at each other for a while, she removed her glance from me and dissolved into thin air.

That day I couldn't fall asleep until dawn.

While I couldn't put my finger on the exact time, I remembered seeing the first light of the morning. The

reason why I still managed to stand up on time was probably because I didn't sleep deeply to begin with.

The reason for my sleep problems was clear: because of the encounter I'd made the day before.

What was that? I asked myself again. I'd been thinking about this question all night to no avail.

There simply was another student at school besides me . While that was the most plausible answer, it struck me as weird that someone could have such a weak presence as to seemingly appear out of nowhere. So weak as to seem absent and present at the same time. In fact, the painting was much more noticeable.

Another answer was that I had just been seeing things. Maybe I'd seen myself in a mirror or there was a girl drawn on that painting that I'd mistaken for a real person . That made sense. However, in this case I think the drawn girl should have been easier to notice.

Or perhaps...was it a ghost...?

I fiercely shook off that thought.

You're being silly! It's not my style to be influenced by rumors.

But while thinking so, my feet were taking me to the art room in the special school building. I couldn't leave this matter at this. No, more precisely, I wouldn't find peace until I had an answer, which was something I wanted to be spared from.

The secondary school building was pretty much empty because the cultural clubs at our school didn't meet in the morning most of the time, and as such, the situation itself resembled that of the evening before. Thanks to the brightness, however, I felt entirely different mentally.

I stood before the art room.

The painting was there unchanged. It was a landscape without any characters in it, and there was no mirror anywhere. I hadn't been seeing things.

Consequentially, there had really been another student here. I must have been a bit skittish because I'd been alone in the dark and the doors had been locked.

"Yeah, I was overreacting," I muttered.

"About me?"

"WHOA!" I shouted out as someone suddenly whispered into my ear. *I can't make fun of Saki for screaming.*

I jumped back and saw a girl standing there, just like the evening before. I hadn't noticed her at all, but she was there indeed. It was the same girl.

"So the rumors were true..." I concluded.

"Rumors?"

"Of a straying school girl who could not ascend to heaven after committing suicide some decades ago, or of a girl who died in a car accident on her way to the opening ceremony and is since restlessly wandering about..."

"What's with those silly stories?"

"They're the rumors surrounding the ghost that has been haunting this school... or, well, you."

"Who is a ghost, you say? Aren't you being a bit rude to me?" she answered.

"Ah, you're not one? ...Ah, yes, of course you're not. Just kidding!"

Unlike the day before when it was dark and I couldn't fully recognize her, she now looked like a perfectly normal girl although not a very remarkable one.

"Besides, did it slip your mind that we were in the same class last year?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You really do not seem to remember, do you, Kurusu-kun?" she remarked sadly.

"Um..."

*I'm afraid to say that I've never had a ghost as a classmate. Uh, or the ghost **of** a classmate? Nono, enough of ghosts.*

At any rate, I didn't remember her even though she seemed to remember *me*. She was probably telling the truth since she knew my name.

"I'm sorry. What's your name, again?"

"I'm Sana Nishiyama," she introduced herself. However, her name didn't sound familiar to me in the least. At most, I had a slight hunch that there was a person like that. "Well, we didn't come in contact that often."

"Y-Yeah..." I stuttered and adopted the excuse she'd prepared for me. But what she said made sense: in a class with almost 40 students, it's only natural that you don't really talk with all of them. On top of that, I wasn't in any club or committee, so there was quite a number of classmates that I hadn't come in touch with. But that's what school is like.

"W-Well, long time no see!"

"You don't mean to say 'pleased to meet you'?"

"Let's not bring this up again..."

While I didn't remember her at all, we were quite frank to each other as former classmates.

Suddenly, the bell signaling the start of homeroom rang.

"Oh crap, I gotta get back," I said as I hurried toward the primary school building but then turned around because she didn't show any signs of leaving. "Hm? You're not coming?"

"I'm fine."

"Fine...?"

"There's no place for me in my class."

Right after homeroom, I went to Nishiyama's class—which was in the next room as I had just heard for the first time—to sneak a peek. A lot of students were still walking around and chatting because there was still time until the break ended, making it hard to locate Nishiyama's seat among all the empty ones.

Suddenly, however, someone approached me, "Oh, is that you, Kurusu?" It was a guy called Sasakura who had been in the same class as me last year. Unlike in Nishiyama's case, I could perfectly remember his face and his name, although we were out of touch as well. " Do you need something?" he asked.

"Ah, you've come just right. This is Nishiyama's class, right?"

"Nishiyama?"

"She was also in our class last year, remember? Is she here?"

"...Ah, Nishiyama. Of course," he replied. It seemed like he had only just remembered. "Wait here a sec, I'll bring her to you."

Sasakura returned into his classroom to call for her. Actually, I only wanted to know whether or not she was here, but I gave up and decided to wait. He approached a girl who was standing nearby, exchanged a few words, and came back.

"Sorry dude, looks like she's absent."

I concluded that she hadn't returned to her class after all when we met, but my gut also told me that this wasn't just the case that day.

"How about yesterday?" I asked.

"Yesterday?"

"Did she come to school?"

"Uh, I suppose? Hrm, really? Maybe she didn't...?" Sasakura muttered as he gazed into space as if to scan his memory. He gave up rather quickly, however, and shook his head. "Beats me. I don't know her too well, you see. She's just too retiring!"

I couldn't disagree with that. I had forgotten her, too, after all.

"So, did you need anything from her? I can leave a note on her desk if you want," he suggested.

"No, it's nothing important. I'll tell her when I see her," I said and turned around to go before he could drill me with questions. Before I left, however, I asked one more myself: "Where is her desk, anyway?"

As I had vaguely expected, Sasakura didn't know where.

"Something wrong?" Shinjou, a classmate of mine, asked me when I was absorbed in thought.

"Just been wondering about something."

We were on lunch break; the morning classes had been over before I knew. What had kept me abstracted was of course Nishiyama.

In fact, I had gone asking Nishiyama's class teacher about her during the first short break. According to the class register, she had been absent for the last three day straight. Moreover, the fields denoting the reason for absence were left blank, effectively making them unexcused absences. However, the teacher hadn't noticed before I explicitly pointed this fact out to him. Paging up the register, I noticed that she had been missing quite a lot in the past, too, albeit irregularly.

The teacher wasn't the only one not taking heed of her absences, though: the subject of Nishiyama's missing was never raised among her classmates, either, as it seemed.

The girl Sasakura had asked for me hadn't noticed at first , either.

Nobody was suspicious about Nishiyama's absence.

Of course, I couldn't say that I would remember if one of my classmates was absent some day. But was it really normal for someone to be missing for three days in a row and no soul noticing? Retiring or not, I felt that this was going too far.

Most likely, people would eventually notice if she continued to truant.

At any rate, I now knew what she had meant when she said that she had no place in her class.

"Ah, by the way, can I ask you something?"

"Ask me what?"

"Do you remember Nishiyama? She was in our class last year," I explained. Shinjou and me had been in the same class since our first year of high school. He was more sociable than me; chances were that he remembered her.

"Hm? You sure?" he said, however, having forgotten her as well.

"I can't believe even you forgot her."

"Hm... I really don't remember. Any description?" he asked.

"She's got bobbed hair and is a bit withdrawn."

"Oh, she's a girl?"

"Of course she is! That's what I've been saying all the time!" *What? He even failed to realize as much?*

"No clue, man. Are you sure about it?" he asked again.

"Of... course? Or was she not in our class...?" I mumbled because I got unsure myself in the face of his upfront question. I'd forgotten her as well, after all.

While I was losing confidence, I recalled that she had told me herself that she used to be in the same class. *No use doubting that*, I thought. It would have been OK to doubt my own memory, since I had for a fact not been able to recognize her, but she'd remembered me. Her memory could be trusted.

"In which class is she now?" Shinjou then asked.

"Ah, she's in the class next door, actually."

"Oh, I see... I haven't ever gone there because they have no soccer players, you know."

Indeed, it was quite easy to get out of touch with other classes. Nobody knew what classes all his classmates from last year had gone to in the 2nd school year. In short, it was entirely natural that he didn't know her class.

"Well, thanks anyway," I said, giving up on the matter.

"Wait, I have to know now. Let's go look it up!"

At Shinjou's suggestion, we went to the library room to take a look at the school's name register.

"Nishiyama... Nishiyama..."

We opened the name register of our class from last year. The list contained about 40 names, which brought back old faces to my mind as I went through them. I remembered my old class better than I'd thought.

Shinjou and I silently skimmed through the names, searching for Nishiyama's entry.

"Found her." My finger stopped at Nishiyama's name. It was set in stone: she had told me the truth.

"Aah, now that I see it, I think there *was* someone with this name. Although her face slipped my mind entirely," he nodded repeatedly as he looked at the entry. "I'm surprised that you could remember her, though."

"I didn't; I only came across her by chance yesterday. She called out to me, but I had no idea who she was and didn't even notice her at first. Man, I don't remember ever talking to her to begin with."

"I haven't ever talked with her either, I think."

Apparently, she hadn't associated a lot with the boys of our old class.

"Hey, nice to see you! What's up?" a girl who'd been in the library asked, approaching us. Her name was Sakurai . She'd been in the same class during the first school year. We definitely remembered her; neither of us was so dumb as to forget our former class president.

She's come just right; I'll ask her too.

"Sakurai, do you remember Nishiyama? She was in our class last year," I asked.

"Nishiyama?" she said with a pondering look and wrinkled her brow. "Who is that? Are you sure?"

Her answer came unexpected; I'd taken it for granted that the girls knew her. From my perspective as a boy, it always looked like they formed a big circle during the lunch breaks. Toward the end, they split up in groups, though.

"Look, it says so here," I pointed at Nishiyama's name in the register.

"Ah, you're right. Hm... come to think of it... I never talked with her, though."

It seemed like Nishiyama hadn't associated a lot with either the boys or the girls. *Well, people like that aren't that rare.*

"Can you tell us anything about her?" I asked.

"Eh? I don't know... I have trouble even recalling her face, to be honest, although I do think that she existed. Did she have a weak presence maybe?"

"Didn't you have to do with her as our class president? "

"I probably did, but it's not like being class president makes you friends with everyone, you know?"

"Well, I know, but still." Still it was strange that Sakurai had forgotten her. Did she have so little of a presence?

"If it's bothering you, then why don't you ask someone who knows? Kouzuki-senseeei!" Sakurai shouted at a teacher who was in the library room. Without any restraint.

"Do I have to remind you that this is the library room, Sakurai-san?" Kouzuki-sensei sighed as she walked toward us. Sakurai remarked her blunder by comically showing her tongue. "Oh, long time no see," the teacher said. She was our deputy class teacher last year.

Though not as bad with Nishiyama, I didn't know what she was doing at the moment, either. I assumed that she was in charge of some other class.

"Sensei, sensei! Do you remember Nishiyama-san?" Sakurai asked.

"Nishiyama-san? You mean the one who was in your class last year?"

"Yes. Wow, not bad!" Sakurai clapped her hands. I didn't think knowing the names of one's students was worth that much praise, though. "What was she like?"

"She was very reserved. Surely, she would never make noise in a library."

"Sorry!"

"What's the matter with her, though?"

"It's just that Kurusu met her yesterday and we weren't sure if there was a girl like that in our class."

"Huh? You met her?" Kouzuki-sensei asked me with surprise all over her face.

"Well, yes, I did." *If you can call that 'meet'...*

"Strange... wasn't she absent from school yesterday?"

"Huh?"

Truth be told, that was unexpected. It surprised me that she knew something even the class teacher hadn't noticed.

"Maybe she only attended her classes?"

I didn't understand what she was muttering to herself. Realizing that I was confused, Kouzuki-sensei explained:

"I'm the teacher in charge of the art club, and she's one of the members."

I see, I thought to myself as the situation became somewhat clearer. She had slipped the minds of people who had to deal with a great deal of other people, like her classmates or her class teacher, getting lost in the shuffle.

However, this was not possible in a small place like the art club.

This also explained why was in the art room when she told me that she had no place in her class. Because she had one in that room.

I might not be allowed to say this, but I was happy that there were still people who remembered her.

I belonged to the art club. While I had only joined the club because it was obligatory at our school, I did in fact like painting. In addition, the club didn't have too many members and, depending on the subject, I did not have to work together with anyone; everyone would just silently draw their painting and maybe talk a bit once every so often. This was a perfect match for me.

However, last year, it was decided at the suggestion of our club leader that we all participate at a contest, which naturally also applied to me.

Left with no other choice, I drew a panorama painting and submitted it.

Because I didn't want so stand out, however, I used the paint inside the Shadow phial for my submission, which I hadn't used for anything else so far.

I find it hard to tell if I actually believed in its effects when I used the paint. Did I firmly believe it would work its magic? Or was I just clutching at straws? Had my white paint simply run out and there was no one I could borrow some from?

As a matter of fact, however, I had almost completely forgotten about that woman and her shop at that point.

In the end, my submission was left without any praise and never saw the light of day.

I was happy about that.

I'd never wanted to take part in a contest; I'd been forced to. In fact, I was relieved that my painting wasn't put on display anywhere.

That being said, some teased me a bit because I didn't even pass the first selection while others sympathized with me. It was obvious that they thought that my lack of presence extended over to my works, too, weakening their impression despite being well-drawn.

One day, I was once again squatting in a corner of the art room.

I had hated to be the center of attention, and yet I sat there wishing for some praise for my painting. Even though my original wish of going unnoticed had come true, I was discontent with the final outcome.

It was a mistake to weaken the impression of a painting, I thought. *Surely, I wouldn't have won a prize, but if I hadn't used Shadow, maybe I would have passed the first selection at least? Or did that paint play no role in this and the outcome would have been the same?*

The setting sun was shining through the window.

Soon it would be getting dark and I could hide in the shadows. My existence would fade into the dark like always.

However, I did not have the patience to wait.

I put some of the paint inside the Shadow phial on my palm.

Whether or not I actually believed in its effects I do not know, but at that very moment, that did not matter. I was simply filled with the wish of disappearing from this world.

And with that wish in my heart, I crumbled some Shadow paint over myself.

As soon as I arrived at my apartment, I dug out some photos from my chest of drawers. Not a full-fledged album, just a few pictures from last year put in an envelope. More precisely, the envelope contained the class picture from the year before.

About 40 students, our previous class teacher and his deputy were lined up in the picture.

I spotted myself standing next to Shinjou, both of us looking somewhat more boyish even though it had just been a year since then. I was not here to wallow in reminiscences, though, and continued searching for Nishiyama.

"Bingo."

Her hair was a bit shorter than at the present time, but it was her without doubt. Despite her average height, she reservedly stood in a corner of the topmost row.

I was planning to show this picture to Shinjou and the others who didn't remember her. Of course, I could have just have them meet her in person, but I didn't want to

ask them to see someone they forgot about. It was bound to be an awkward experience for both parties.

Showing around a picture of her was not going to change anything, but I wanted to make her at least a bit more noticed by her surroundings.

I could not just turn a blind eye to a matter I'd poked my nose into.

I hoped to create an opportunity for her to return to her classroom.

"Hurry up, Kurusu, we're going!"

"Wait a sec, I'm coming!"

The fifth period was music. While I didn't particularly like music lessons, I definitely preferred it over math and history for the first class after the lunch break.

A bit behind our classmates, Shinjou and I traversed the passage connecting the primary and secondary school building.

"By the way, what happened to those ghost stories?" Shinjou brought up the rumors the entire school had gotten excited about for the last few days. They had faded into obscurity by now and hardly appeared in any talks anymore.

"They're clearly about to die out, but I guess they didn't do too bad?"

"Well, there haven't been any sightings in a while, after all."

"How about you, Shinjou? Ever seen that ghost?"

"Nope. But I wonder what she looked like... would have loved to see her once," Shinjou said, and because he said something tactless and naughty, I decided to tease him a bit.

"I'm so going to tell this that cute first-year girl."

"Please don't."

We had a completely normal talk. But something was off.

"What's wrong?" Shinjou asked me with a raised eyebrow because I'd fallen silent.

Hm...? What is it that's bothering me?

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked again. "The music room is a room farther, this is the art room."

"The art room...?" I looked at the wall of the art room, which was adorned with several painting made by students. One of the paintings was labeled with the name of Sana Nishiyama.

"Hm? Did that painting catch your eye? Drawn by... a Nishiyama, eh? Interested to know in what year that person is."

I gasped and whipped around to Shinjou.

"W-What?" he asked in a confused manner.

"Nishiyama!"

"Hah?"

"Don't you remember Nishiyama?"

"Huh? Is that student so famous that I should know?"

"What are you talking about!" I exclaimed, "She was in our class last year!"

"For real? You sure about that?"

What? What is he talking about?

It wasn't surprising that he didn't remember her, since she was hard to notice, but this wasn't the problem here.

This is weird! Didn't we talk about her just yesterday? No, that's not it. That's not the point.

What was really unsettling was that—even I had completely forgotten about her until that very moment.

I stuck my hand into my pocket. Inside was a class photo.

I remember now. I had dug out that picture the evening before just to show it to Shinjou, and yet I had completely forgotten about it—no, about Nishiyama herself. Even while we were talking about those ghost stories I'd failed to remember her—only after seeing her painting, her name, I finally recalled.

What's the meaning of this? Why have I forgotten Nishiyama? What's wrong with me... with us?

"Shinjou, go ahead," I said and left behind a puzzled Shinjou as I entered the art room. "—There she is."

Noticing my entrance, Nishiyama flashed a smile. It was a smile of relief. She must have been thinking that I'd ignore her like the others.

"Ah, urm, sorry. I was busy."

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked, "We didn't have an appointment, did we?"

Indeed, we didn't. Still, I had a somewhat guilty conscience about forgetting her.

"Thank you very much for paying me some attention," she said and the 5th period bell rang. "The period is starting."

"Yeah, but..."

I felt that it was wrong to just go and leave her. However, it was then that the door opened and

Kouzuki-sensei, the teacher in charge of the art club, appeared.

"What are you doing here? The period just started!" she said.

"Ah, yes!"

"Come, hurry up," she rushed me and chased me out of the room, leaving behind only Nishiyama. I gave Kouzuki-sensei a observant look; she showed no signs of trying to get Nishiyama out of the room.

"Um, Kouzuki-sensei?"

"Yes?"

"What about Nishiyama?"

"Don't worry about her, but you should hurry up."

I was relieved. She *had* noticed Nishiyama; she hadn't ignored her. Perhaps, she was aware that Nishiyama couldn't return to her class.

Leaving her to Kouzuki-sensei, I left the art room for good.

"...Wait," Nishiyama said as she followed me out.

"Are you going to your class, too?"

She shook her head. Maybe it was cruel of me to ask that.

"No, it's OK. I'm sorry," I apologized.

"It's fine. But may I ask you to come again after school? I'd like to ask you a favor."

"OK, got it." I accepted because of feelings of guilt and because I figured that I was the only person she could rely on.

"Would you go back to your class now? Or do you want to make me angry?" Kouzuki-sensei scolded me, standing behind me before I knew.

"Later" I said with a wave and headed toward the music room.

"Kurusu-kun, there's some dust on your shoulder."

Nishiyama stood behind me and brushed my shoulder with a handkerchief.

"It's a promise."

I vowed to myself not to forget this promise.

"Excuse me, I'm late," I said as I entered the music room. The students were lined up and singing, while the teacher was playing the piano.

"Oh, Kurusu-kun? I thought you were here. Anyway, hurry up and line up."

"Right away," I nodded and stepped into the group, positioning myself next to Shinjou. "Great, I could've just sneaked in if she hadn't noticed anyway..."

Because we had to stand during choir practice, it was hard to tell who was present and who was not; in other words, I could have waited for an opportunity and secretly mix with the group.

"Hey Kurusu, Where have you been?"

"Hm? At the art room, of course."

"Caught the wrong room? How lame," Shinjou laughed.

Contrary to what he claimed, I'd deliberately entered the art room. Perhaps, he did not quite get that part when I had him go ahead.

On the way back from the music room, I had the urge to stop by the art room, but I eventually just walked past the door. This time, I remembered her and the promise to meet up after school.

The 6th period was English. Our English teacher was famous for picking every student once during each lesson, but because the order itself was random, you could not sleep until your turn was over.

Well, at least it's the last class for today.

The lesson went on with the students who had been picked answering his questions or reading passages in a text. Although I could have been picked at any moment, I was in the art room with my mind.

I wonder what's Nishiyama doing right now?

To be honest, it was cryptic to me why she would even come to school when she was just sitting in the art room anyway, not evening showing up in her class and accumulating unexcused absences.

Is she waiting for someone to talk to her? If so, am I supposed to tell her to attend her classes? Maybe I should talk about this with Sasakura or their class teacher?

I was still pondering when suddenly the bell rang, ending the 6th period.

"Huh?"

I hadn't been picked throughout the lesson. I had a run of luck, it seemed.

While the class was cleaning the room, I leaned against a broom and killed some time until we could go talking with Shinjou.

"Boy was I lucky today."

"Why so?"

"English class. He didn't pick me even once," I explained.

"Seriously? Geez, I had to answer twice!"

"Well, unlike you I'm always behaving well."

Our chit-chat was interrupted when our class teacher came in. We swiftly pretended to be wiping the floor. Since we were doing this every day, we had already mastered the timing.

But against my expectations, the teacher walked up to us. What he pointed out, however, was not our lazing about.

"Hey, Kurusu," he said. "Where have you been during the 6th period?"

"Hah?"

He made no sense to me.

"Kobayashi-sensei notified me that you didn't attend his English class. You skipped, didn't you?"

I exchanged glances with Shinjou.

It was clear now why Kobayashi-sensei hadn't picked me; he'd thought I wasn't in class to begin with.

"No, I didn't. I was there, right?"

"Eh? I, uh, think so..."

"Should I show you my notes if you don't believe me?"

While I wasn't studious enough to take proper notes, I'd still written down one thing or another.

"Is that so? Kobayashi-sensei must have overlooked you, then. I'm sorry," he apologized and without suspecting me any further, he went to his desk to prepare for the homeroom session.

It was then that Shinjou whispered something disturbing to me.

"Were you really here during the 6th period...?"

Have you ever wondered how many people would cry for you if you died?

I have.

There aren't many who would have any tears to spare for an unnoticeable girl like me with next to no friends.

No, "not many" is pushing it. Maybe there wouldn't be anyone at all.

No, maybe nobody would even notice that I were dead.

I used to be OK with that. I had come to terms with that thought.

However, right now...

I want at least someone to notice me.

I want at least someone to cry for me.

I want at least someone to disappear together with me.

Right.

I no longer want to be alone.

What's going on?

Everyone around me was acting strange; they were starting to forget me. My presence was growing weak like Nishiyama's.

Why is this happening? When did my presence start to weaken?

When? When did it start? When I first met her?

While trying to calm down, I walked to the art room in search of an answer.

Nishiyama was standing alone before her painting and gazing at the scenery inside. The moment I saw her, all my doubt and confusion was blown away.

I walked up to her but was at a loss for words. I unwittingly rubbed my eyes, but what I saw did not change.

Nishiyama was standing before the painting. Between it and me.

Right; she was standing before the painting and yet I could recognize it was a panorama picture.

Nishiyama had pulled off the remarkable feat of ... letting me see the picture through her body.

"Kurusu-kun," she called as she turned around to me. Her dwindling voice could still reach me, I realized with surprise.

"What... what happened to you?"

Resignation showed on her face when she heard my words.

"I suppose I'm really transparent, right?" she said as she gazed at her own hands. Probably, she could see the floor through them.

I followed suit and looked at my hands as well. They were not transparent yet, but it was probably just a matter of time.

All of a sudden, my eyes met with those of two first-year girls who had come upstairs. They were observing us from afar, slightly startled. *Because Nishiyama's transparent*, I guessed.

The two girls awoke from their state of shock and hurried down the corridor, ignoring us. After they had created some distance, I heard them talking:

"Did you see that? He was talking to a picture!"

"Shh! Do you want him to hear you? He was just talking to himself, surely."

At first I couldn't make sense of their dialog; I thought I'd misheard them.

Talking to a picture? Talking to himself?

I swung my head around to Nishiyama.

"It's as you think. Nobody can see me anymore. Except for you, Kurusu-kun."

"What happened?"

"I don't really know, either..."

"I'm not only talking about your becoming invisible, but about this situation in general. Don't you think this is weird?"

Not only her invisibility, but also the fact that her whole present and past classes had forgotten about her struck me as weird. Actually, the fact that this very thought hadn't occurred to me sooner was just plain weird. I suspected that even my concern toward her situation had been strangely bland.

"I did notice that something was strange since a few days, but at first I thought they'd simply forgotten me. I mean, it's not that rare that a name doesn't get called during a roll call or that somebody is skipped during a question round, or that a sheet is missing when you're sitting in the last row, right?"

As she said, such things happen.

"But one time when my name wasn't called during the roll call, I got curious and took a look at the class book and found that I was marked as absent. When I notified the teacher of this mistake, he told me that he hadn't noticed me and apologized. But the next day, he made

the same mistake again, and continued doing so with increasing regularity."

That was clearly weird. If done on purpose, then you could easily call it bullying.

"Naturally, I started wondering if I'd done something bad to our class teacher, but I couldn't think of anything. Besides, other than forgetting to call my name, he acted completely normal and treated me politely.

"—But one day, he walked straight up to me and asked me, "Who are you?" Even though we had talked the day before, he completely forgot about me. When I told him my name, he recalled who I am, though, but the next day , the same thing happened again..."

"He... didn't do that on purpose, did he?"

Nishiyama wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. "There was no ill will. I wish there had been. But both our teachers and my classmates just... forgot me. They looked at me and genuinely didn't know how I was."

That was why she couldn't stay in her class. That was what she meant by having no place there.

What must it be like to be treated as a stranger by people who should know you? Her trembling was a clear answer to this question.

"Do you remember our promise? May I ask you a favor?" she suddenly said as if to break her trembling.

Promise? I wondered. *What promise is she talking about? I can't remember making one with her. Does that mean that I'm starting to forget her, too?*

However, I kept my doubts to myself and nodded with feigned calmness.

"Please make a call to my family. It's a strange request, I know, but I haven't gone home since three days."

I had been wrong; I thought she came to school every day, when in reality she had been at school all day and night. Before I could ask for the reason, she produced her cell phone and showed me her home telephone number on its display. I gave up on the interrogation and decided to accept her request.

With my own cell phone I copied the number and called her family. After a few beeps, a woman answered the phone.

"Hello? Am I speaking with Mrs. Nishiyama? My name is Kurusu and I'm in the same school as Sana Nishiyama."

"Oh, hello. I am Sana's mother," she answered politely. As if the world was in perfect order.

"Is Nishiyama-san at home?" I asked in a natural manner. Nishiyama hadn't given me any instructions, but I knew what she wanted to know.

"Sana? Just a moment, please." With these words, she put the call on hold. Apparently, she went looking for her daughter.

The "hold" sound was loud enough to reach Nishiyama's ears and distort her face with distress.

"I am sorry. She has not come home from school yet. Do you want me to call you back?"

"No, thank you, but may I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Did she come home yesterday?"

"Eh?" Nishiyama's mother fell silent and stopped time. "Yes, I think she did...?"

"And the day before that?"

"Eh..."

"And a day farther back...?" I continued.

"....."

With a click, the call ended. Nishiyama had hung up the phone for me.

"That's enough," she said with a soft, fragile smile.

She had probably been scared to learn the truth directly and asked me to do the call instead. Her hopes had been betrayed, however, and the truth was not the one she'd wished for.

"I always knew I have not much of a presence. Nobody pays me attention, be it in class or at home."

The reason why she had stayed in the art room was because there was no place for her in class or at home.

There was no place where she belonged to, only places where she didn't belong to.

"I'm going to disappear, right?" she muttered, accepting her vanishing body, her dwindling existence. " But nobody is going to notice..."

She gave up.

"Is there no cause that you can think of...?" I asked her with a certain possibility in mind.

"A cause...?"

"Did you, for instance, use or pick up something unusual?"

"Eh?"

"Something known as a Relic."

The moment I said this, pure surprise showed on her face.

She had heard of the Relics. She had heard of something only people who got in contact with should know.

At last, she showed me a phial she had bought in a certain shop.

It was an oval phial with little lobe-like handles attached on both sides and a protruding lid. Inside was powdered paint.

She then explained to me that she had painted a picture with that paint. A picture which she then submitted to a contest.

I picked up the utterly inconspicuous phial.

Its color was—

Black.

At times, we forget about things because they can be taken for granted. We may forget things that we don't try to remember, we may forget things that don't matter. Things like what we had for dinner the other day; things

like who was not at school the day before; things like what new class a former classmate is in.

However, it's completely absurd if a mother doesn't know whether or not her daughter has come home in the last three days.

That doesn't only apply to her mother.

People—her classmates, her former classmates, her class teacher, and even me—have been forgetting her way too much.

This has long exceeded the bounds of having a low profile.

This is abnormal.

Everybody is acting abnormal.

Ridiculously abnormal.

This situation is ridiculously abnormal.

At last, I managed to recognize how abnormal all this is. There was no swaying between deeming it normal and abnormal anymore.

It *is* abnormal.

Nishiyama was in possession of a black phial; not a white one. She owned the black one.

The paint contained in the black phial—known as " Light"—had the effect of making things stand out. And according to her, she had painted a picture with it.

As a result, her submission was valued as poorly drawn but extraordinarily impressive, and earned her an honorable mention.

Needless to say, it was all thanks to Light.

In that case, did the black phial have the side effect of weakening the impression of its owner once it strengthened that of a different target?

That was not the case. I even gave Towako-san a call and she also denied it.

So, why was it that Nishiyama had become so inconspicuous? Because she had been like that to begin with? No, not at all. That was not remotely normal.

This situation had been caused by a Relic, and she was on the verge of ruin.

However, the Relic that was to blame was not her Light, but someone else's Shadow—

Someone had weakened her presence using Shadow, and most likely I had fallen victim to that someone as well. I was going to be forgotten just like her.

The person in possession of Shadow must have come in contact with both Nishiyama and me, especially during the past few days.

I had no idea about that person's reasons and purposes , but I had an idea who it could be.

In order to meet that person, I stood in front of a certain door. On the other side of it was the owner of Shadow.

The owner presented the greatest abnormality among all abnormalities that had happened.

Many people had forgotten Nishiyama; her face, her name, mutual memories both old and new, and her very existence.

However, in the abnormal environment that the Relic created, forgetting her was perfectly normal in a sense.

Nishiyama had become a being that was to be forgotten.

The most abnormal thing that happened within that abnormal status quo was—

"That *you* remembered her!"

I pointed it out to her. To Kouzuki-sensei.

I'd always been an inconspicuous girl.

I was unable to properly integrate into my class and had no friends, even though I had a great class indeed. They never bullied me, they never ignored me.

But sometimes they would just forget me.

The fact that they meant no harm made this cruel kind of forgetting only tougher for me.

Things did not improve throughout the 16 years I spent in school, from elementary school to university. As a matter of fact, I always failed to fit into my classes because of my poor group work skills and was never invited to any of our class reunions; which was natural, considering how I spent my school life.

However, I never wanted this.

I did want to join my classmates and I did want them to pay attention to me. I didn't ask for standing out; I just wanted them to realize that I was here.

Perhaps that was why I chose to become a teacher.

If I was the teacher inside a class instead of just another student, then I was going to be noticed for sure. People would stop forgetting about me.

However, my hopes proved wrong.

By that I don't mean that my class fell into a state of confusion, but that I simply failed to bridge the divide between teacher and students.

By assuming the position of a teacher, I had unwittingly enlarged the gulf between the class and me. I wasn't the type of teacher who would chat with their students or engage in sports with them, either.

I was treated as a "teacher" not as "me".

My relationship with my students was of a fleeting nature and limited to my lessons and homeroom sessions. Whenever my class changed, they would stop greeting me on the corridors, and when I met an old student in town, they would just ignore me.

Becoming a teacher had been a mistake.

But just when I was thinking of quitting, I met Nishiyama-san.

A year had passed since I'd obtained the Shadow Relic.

One day, I found her looking at a painting of mine that was on display at the entrance to the art room. A year before, the members of the art club—which I was in charge of because the teachers at this school were forced to take care of one—had talked me into participating in an art contest and made me draw that picture.

It was an inconspicuous landscape painting that had received no attention and was made with Shadow paint. My students had urged me to hang it on the wall before the art room.

She was looking upon a painting that was supposed to catch nobody's attention.

"What a magnificent picture. It doesn't catch the eye, but it gives off a gentle impression."

She was the first person to ever find me.

After that incident, we started talking with each other and I got to know her better. She was very similar to me. Like me, she had trouble to integrate into her class and ended up being forgotten because of her weak presence.

She was a carbon copy of me.

I invited her into the art club. The club had been memberless ever since the previous third-year students had graduated, but I was actually thankful of that.

I would teach her how to draw, and she would listen to me. I wouldn't ignore her, and she wouldn't ignore me.

It was the one-to-one relationship I'd wished for.

However, one day the equilibrium was broken.

Shortly after she had started her second year, she won an award in a contest. Unlike her, the painting stood out and caught everyone's attention, but that didn't stop me from cheering with all my heart.

In all my delight, I invited her to a dinner to celebrate her success.

However, her answer was: "My classmates already invited me to a celebration party. I'm sorry, sensei."

I will never forget that moment; the moment I saw her leaving through the school gate, surrounded by her classmates.

She changed on that day and stopped being the retiring girl who couldn't integrate.

She stayed in touch with me of course, but she stopped visiting me at the art room during breaks. She started to come late to her club activities when she used to come right after homeroom had ended.

"I was talking with friends," she would explain with a beaming smile.

Her once weak presence grew stronger with every passing day.

Therefore, I made up my mind.

I used a Relic on her—Shadow.

"What are you talking about? What's so strange about remembering her?"

"Right, it wouldn't be strange at all. *Normally*."

At this very moment, the abnormal thing was not the fact that everyone forgot about Nishiyama.

I had forgotten her. Shinjou, Sasakura and Sakurai had forgotten her. Even her class teacher had forgotten her.

Everyone had forgotten her.

Despite that, there was only one person who always remembered her.

Originally, I'd attributed it to their relationship as an art club member and the art club teacher.

But I was wrong. Even her parents had forgotten her, after all.

In a state where she was forgotten despite a relationship of mother and daughter, Kouzuki-sensei managed to remember Nishiyama.

That was the real abnormality in the current state of affairs.

"You've come in contact with a Relic, haven't you?" I said.

Her face contorted with surprise, Kouzuki-sensei asked, "How much do you know...?"

"I think I get the gist of it."

"Do you also know what my Relic does?"

"It dims your presence and your very existence."

"Correct!" she nodded.

"When did you weaken my presence with it?"

"Today. Right before the art room."

"As I thought..." I said and remembered how she had suddenly stood behind me during the fifth period, in front of the art room.

If not for Nishiyama, who'd brushed the paint off, the effects would have been a lot more notable.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Oh, it's nothing personal," she explained. "I just felt like obscuring your existence a little because you were getting quite close to her; so that you wouldn't grow on her. I don't want to do this, but if you keep caring for her, I'll eliminate you for good! So don't get in my way anymore, OK?" Kouzuki-sensei threatened me in a calm tone.

Her answer was beside my point. I had already guessed as much when I found out about her.

"We're not talking about me here. I want to know why you used the Relic on her."

"Her...? Who are you talking about?"

"Who...?" I asked in disbelief but I couldn't recall a name.

"So..." she said as she walked up to me and put her hand on my cheek. "*Whose* presence did I weaken again?"

"It's..."

.....I had forgotten.

Good boy.

Forget her. She will forget you, too.

I will not give her to anyone. She's the like-minded person I've been looking for.

She should exist just for my sake; because I also exist just for her sake.

No matter who forgets her, I will not.

No matter who forgets me, she will not.

Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head——

A girl was jumping over the fence on the roof, with a presence as frail as a shimmer of air. Her existence felt so frail, in fact, that I thought that the wind might take her with it.

However.

I was brought back to reality with gruesome vividness.

The girl who had jumped over the fence started to accelerate downward according to the laws of physics and hit the ground in no time.

Leaving behind a big red flower of blood as proof of her existence.

——But that wasn't reality.

It was but the future my Relic showed to me.

My right eye was artificial. A Relic named "Vision" had been implanted where once my real eye had been.

"Vision" would show me the immediate future. However, it wouldn't just show me all of the future. I couldn't foresee the winning number of a lottery, or the winner of a sports match. Not even the weather. Nor could I see any future events at will.

But there was one type of future it would show me without fail.

That is, when I or someone I knew was in danger. At those times, it showed me the moment of their death.

When that happened, a pain would run through my head, much like static TV noise, followed by a cut-in of the future. And then I would take another action than in the future shown, trying to prevent the predicted death.

I had just seen a certain girl's future whose name I had already forgotten. However, she did without a doubt exist and she didn't deserve such an outcome.

Fractions of my memories of the girl had been momentarily restored by Vision.

She was going to despair and end her life.

"You have to stop..."

"What do you want me to stop? Geez..."

"You have to stop her before it's too late!" I shouted.

"Huh?" she gasped puzzledly and inclined her head.

"She's going to *die*! On the roof!"

"That's absurd..."

I stuck my fingers into my right eye socket and scooped out my artificial eye: Vision.

"Eek!"

"You're not the only owner of a Relic. I have one, too. This Relic is called Vision and it lets you foresee death. I saw hers. At this rate she's going to die!"

"That's..."

"Quick!"

I couldn't even recall her face anymore; chances were that I wouldn't be able to catch her by myself.

Only you can stop her.

Kouzuki-sensei however fell to the ground and couldn't seem to move.

"Dammit!"

I dashed off toward the rooftop, running through the corridor at full speed and taking several steps at once on the stairways, and eventually pushed open the door to the roof without losing momentum.

I looked around.

"There's nobody here..."

There wasn't a soul in sight.

Did you see that? He was talking to a picture—

Shh! Do you want him to hear you? He was just talking to himself, surely—

The talk between the first-year girls suddenly crossed my mind.

I could no longer see her. I could no longer perceive her.

Despite all that, I shouted:

"Hey! I know you're here!"

I could no longer even remember her name.

"Kurusu-kun..." a voice answered.

I could still hear her. It was not too late.

However, I couldn't locate where the voice was coming from because of the wind.

"Where...? Where are you?!"

"You can't see me anymore, either, can you?" I could sense despair grow stronger in her.

The fence clanked.

What should I do? How do I stop her?

—Remember! The vision you've seen! Where was she? Where did she climb over the fence?

"Thanks for remembering me."

I had taken the wrong measure: I was not supposed to find her whereabouts, I was supposed to find the words to stop her.

But by the time I finally realized that—

"Nishiyama-san!"

—Kouzuki-sensei had already ran past me.

She could still see her. As the only one here—as the only one in the world—she could still see her.

Kouzuki-sensei ran across the rooftop, climbed over the fence and clutched at nothing.

Her hand grasped something.

Her hand grasped something that I could not see and pulled it back. Or so it looked for a moment.

I didn't wish for this.

I just didn't want to lose you. Not in my dreams would I have thought that my own ego was going to make me lose you for all time.

The words of the shopkeeper whose face I forgot came to mind.

Be careful: if you dim an existence too often, it will disappear altogether—

How many times have I used Shadow on you?

I didn't care. You would not disappear from me, after all, I thought.

Everything was fine as long as I remembered you, I thought.

Such filthy egoism.

I'm sorry.

It's no use apologizing, but I'm sorry.

It might become another bad memory for you, but—

The days we spent together were the sole prime of my life.

It was a solemn funeral.

Both teachers and students came to bid her farewell. The second-year students who had known her were complete, while first and third-year students were free to attend or not. But even though attendance was voluntary , they still came in fairly big numbers.

Counting the attendees may offend decency, but their numbers proved how well-liked she had been during her lifetime.

She was valued as someone reserved but kind.

We were there as well, having known her during the first school year, and bade her farewell.

We lined up before her coffin and went on with burning incense for her and praying for her.

In my head, I called out to her:

Look how many people are crying for you!

Especially Nishiyama, who was standing next to me, couldn't hold back her tears.

Looking at Kouzuki-sensei's funeral portrait I was reminded of her soft smile. I'd had no idea that she was fighting with such negative feelings inside, with such an obsession.

However, no matter how wrong her ways, she did without a doubt hold Nishiyama dear.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have pulled Nishiyama back to safety without fear of risking her own life.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have worried about Nishiyama while confronted with her own death.

Before she died, the moment when she ran past me, Kouzuki-sensei left me with the words, "The rest is up to you."

Kouzuki-sensei had taken on the role of saving Nishiyama's life, and I had taken on the role of saving Nishiyama's existence.

When I pondered about a way to save her, a certain painting came to mind. The painting that had promoted her from an inconspicuous girl to the center of attention and that had made me stop with awe that night.

I took Nishiyama's painting off the art room wall, scraped off the dried paint, and went back to throw it where I thought Nishiyama was.

As a result, she became visible again, lying before the edge of the roof, and I regained all my memories of her, both fresh and old.

The others, too, recalled who she was and were dazzled how they could've forgotten her in the first place .

Neither her class nor Nishiyama herself knew why. Only Kouzuki-sensei and me knew.

However, I had no notion of telling them the truth.

It was an undeniable truth that Kouzuki-sensei had driven Nishiyama to suicide, albeit unwittingly. But if Nishiyama were to learn about Kouzuki-sensei's reasons, she would blame herself for neglecting her.

For taking advantage of her Relic, Light.

I was sure that Kouzuki-sensei didn't wish for that, either, so I kept the truth to myself.

However, once she had digested Kouzuki-sensei's death, I would tell her the truth and how beloved she'd been.

Love and obsession had killed her.

I'd seen many people who had suffered the same fate.

I can't say I'm jealous, I thought.

But could I ever feel so much love and attachment for something as to be willing to sacrifice myself...?

Chapter 2 - Gamble

I don't go to horse races.

I've never spent money on cycle races, motorboat races and pachinko[1] either. I have not experienced such gambling in any conceivable form.

Well, I'm still in high school after all. Of course I haven't.

However.

Instead I have experienced a different kind of gamble—one that does not require money—countless times; a risky gamble that could cost my life when making a mistake.

So far, I have always won those gambles and overcome several threats that a student of my age could not normally hope to experience.

But how will I fare when there's something at stake that is more important than my life?

I always wanted to know the answer.

I always wanted to know the result first.

When I was studying, I would solve the problem after looking at the solution.

When I was having a meal, I would sit down at table after asking what I would be eating.

When I was going on a trip, I would depart after looking up the connection to the destination and its geographical features and specialties.

When I was playing a game, I would consult a game guide.

When I was dealing with others, I would only befriend someone after finding out whether or not he was well-disposed toward me.

Knowing the answer in advance made everything just so much easier.

I dislike aimlessness, recklessness and spontaneity. As such, it might have been inevitable that I obtained *this* power.

It happened just the other day, in a shop that I had found while rambling about the city. Therefore, I don't remember

clearly where I found that shop, but I do remember that it had something mysterious about it.

Well, considering that they offered magical things like this—I think they called them "Relics"—the shop might shoot past the term "mysterious" and end up plain "creepy".

Anyway, at that creepy shop I got ahold of one of those mysterious Relics and the curious power it bore.

That being said, I'm still trying to find out how to make best use of this power. Anyone else would have probably instantly found one.

If anyone were to know about this power of mine, they would certainly dismiss my way of using it as pathetic.

Nevertheless, I keep searching for the best way to use it.

...Oh yes, I forgot to mention one thing.

There is one more thing that I dislike.

Humans.

Because there is no answer to humans, and even when there is one, the answer will change with time.

"I'm out for a while."

With these words, Towako-san happily went off.

"Again..."

"Yes, again."

As Saki and I just mutually admitted, Towako-san was frequently disappearing somewhere lately. Being the owner of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, Towako Settsu would often be away for days to purchase new goods, but her recent excursions were of a different nature: she would just leave at evening and come back in the middle of the night. Of course, she showed no sign of buying anything either.

"Let's go."

"At once."

After quickly locking all doors, we hurried in the direction we'd seen Towako-san go. We found her in no time and started to pursue her.

Actually, I had asked her about her absences the day before, but the answer I'd gotten was roundabout and ambiguous. Even worse, she had been blatantly flustered and her attempt to talk her way out had been downright miserable.

Because her strange behavior had made me suspicious, I'd decided to go into the matter.

"But should we really be doing this...?" Saki asked. While she was with me on this, she wasn't fully convinced by the idea of tailing Towako-san.

Doubtlessly, she was right in that spying on somebody like this was to be considered indecent. I was not going to deny that. However, judging by the fact that I had never before seen Towako-san act that way and the fact that she was hiding something from us, I deemed this matter to be fairly grave.

"Maybe she got caught up in some incident, don't you think?"

"Yes, perhaps, but..."

"Wouldn't it be *a disaster* if something happened to our shop owner? If worst comes to worst, we might have to close down!"

Saki gasped. My choice of words was very effective against her, as someone who loved loved the Tsukumodo Antique Shop more than anyone. "We must not let that happen."

"I know, right?"

"It can't be helped then. We are doing it for the Tsukumodo Antique Shop."

I could feel an iron will forming in Saki. Although her face remained expressionless.

Towako-san turned from the main street into a narrow side street and walked along for a while until she stopped before a high building and knocked at its metal door. The building seemed rather desolate. I wondered what it was for.

After a few moments, the door opened from inside and a suited man appeared. They exchanged a few words, which I couldn't catch because of the distance, after which the man showed her the way in.

Towako-san put on a smile and entered the building.

"Are they..."

"On a secret date?" Saki replied with an unexpected answer to my accidental mutter. To my surprise, however, her words clicked with me.

This is... this is... getting interesting!

Truth be told, I had never really expected this to be a grave matter, but neither had I expected a development like that. Originally, I had expected something along the lines of her going to that dubious sister shop of hers.

"Let's go."

"Wait," Saki stopped me just when I was about to go nearer to the site. "We must not invade her privacy. We should stop here."

"Look, she's spending working hours on private matters without a justification. I do think we have the right to investigate this matter."

"You have a point there."

Whoa girl, you've changed your mind quickly, haven't you?

Well, being the zealous shop assistant she is, Saki is probably very much concerned by the fact that her boss is prioritizing her private matters over her shop, I thought, making up excuses for Saki, but in reality she was just as interested in Towako-san's private life as me.

In order to get an idea of the building's purpose, we walked around to its front and found out that we were looking at an obscure arcade. We also tried going inside, but there were only a bunch of old video arcade machines, a few young part-time employees and a few customers.

Needless to say, there was no trace of either Towako-san or her suited companion.

We went out and walked to the rear side again.

"What should we do?" Saki asked.

"Not that I want to get caught, but it's not like we have a choice."

I tried turning the door knob of the door Towako-san had used, but the door was already locked. I also knocked at it just in case, but of course it didn't open.

There was no peephole built into the door, either. Judging by the fact that someone had opened the door just when she arrived—

"As I thought." I discovered a small, hidden surveillance camera.

For the time being, I decided to try knocking again. There was no reaction whatsoever.

"E-x-c-u-s-e m-e! I want to sell game coins!" I said with a deliberately loud voice and stubbornly kept knocking at the door. Before long, the door opened.

"What is it?" the suited man who had showed Towako-san in asked.

"I would like to change my game coins to money..."

"We don't do that here."

"Huh? You don't? But I was told that I had to come here! So where do I change my coins now?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know. Ask someone of the part-timers."

"That's what I did and he told me to come her!" I countered.

"And I told you that you're wrong here."

"Now that's strange. Didn't a woman just go inside to change her coins?"

The man's face tensed up for an instant. The next instant, he grabbed my collar with his thick arms and pulled me inside.

"Wha?!"

After throwing me to the ground and pulling Saki inside as well, he locked the door.

"Who are you guys?" he asked in a voice that made my blood run cold. By the looks of it, I had talked a bit too big. Alarm bells started ringing in my head.

So much for a "secret date". If anything this looks like a secret smuggling site if you ask me.

"What do you want here?" the man asked again.

"Changing my coins..."

"Don't you lie to me," he said in an imperative tone.

I ground my teeth. *If I were honest here and told him about Towako-san, would that give her any problems? Would it get her in trouble?*

"Speak up."

"We..."

"What are you doing here?"

All of a sudden, Towako-san appeared from inside with an expression somewhere between bewilderment and surprise. She looked completely different than before , however, wearing some fancy makeup with a tight, sleeveless red dress. She was a confident beauty from the outset, but fully dressed her sex appeal was boosted to the max.

"Do you know them?" the suited man asked Towako-san. Seeing her nod, he changed his attitude toward us dramatically.

"What's the matter?" a pretty woman about Towako-san's age asked as she entered the same way. Her Japanese was flawless, but the golden, curly hair reaching down to her waist and her large emerald green eyes suggested that she was only half Japanese. She also wore a sleeveless dress that revealed her shoulders, her back and her cleavage, making her a captivating sight.

"Oh, isn't this a lovely guest?" she said with a mature smile turned at me.

"....."

For some reason, Saki treaded on my foot.

"So you followed me around, eh?"

Contrary to the building's outward appearance, there seemed to be a decent office inside. After bringing us to a reception room and having us tell her the details how we'd come here, Towako-san screwed up her face.

"I can't believe that Saki-chan tagged along with you, Tokiya..."

"I'm sorry" I said while Saki was just silently keeping her head down and emitting an apologetic aura.

"Forgive them already. They only followed you because they were worried about you, right?"

"Hm, I guess so..." Towako-san pressed out.

"Exactly! I don't mean to stress this point, but we were *horribly* worried because you've been acting strange lately!"

"You are stressing it, though."

Too blatant, eh? It's a truth that we were worried, though.

"Don't you think that you could at least explain the situation to us?" I asked.

While letting out a sigh, Towako-san leaned back into the sofa.

"Well, you see, Erika here asked me a favor."

Erika was the beautiful woman who had spoken earlier.

"This is a casino that belongs to Erika. I was invited here as a guest because we met each other at a bar and hit it off well together. But things happened and she asked me a favor."

After Towako-san had finished speaking, Erika opened a curtain that was hung up in the room. Behind it was a window through which we could see what was going on in the basement.

The basement was a large hall with tables for roulette and card games, and slot machines like I had seen on TV in a casino in LA. Of course, it was a small casino that could not hold a candle to LA, but I could sense the elegant mood filling the hall despite the soundproof glass .

That being said, I hadn't expected an underground casino like this to exist in this town. *Hm? Wait...?*

"Aren't casinos illegal in..." Erika pressed her hand against my lips in mid-sentence.

"No need to finish that thought."

"Y-Yes."

Her silent pressure convinced me not to pursue that thought. *Right, we're here for Towako-san, aren't we!*

"But if she consulted you, Towako-san, does that mean that...?" Saki asked while carefully choosing her words, but Towako-san answered without further ado:

"Yeah, Relics are involved," she said, upon which Erika added, "At least that's a possibility."

From the looks of it, Erika was aware of the existence of Relics.

"So, what kind of incident are we dealing with?" I asked.

Towako-san gave Erika an inquiring look. She answered with a smile.

"There's this guest who's cheating and raking in all the cash. The problem is that we can't prove it."

"There's no proof of his cheating, but he never ever loses," Erika added.

"He never loses?"

"Yes. He naturally loses a few games every so often, but he always wins on the whole. Always. That's not possible in gambling."

"That's why I thought that Relics might be at work here," Towako-san explained.

He gambles but he always wins. He cheats but he doesn't get caught. I agree, that sounds real suspicious, I thought.

"At this point, that's only another possibility, though. But we agreed that I'll get the Relic if it turns out that he is really using one to cheat."

Towako-san hated it when Relics fell into people's hands. Not because she considered herself a collector of

Relics, but because she knew of countless people who had ruined their lives with them. This time around, an acquaintance of hers was directly concerned, so the case was clear.

"And that's that. Now go home."

"Huh?"

"You have no part to play here, no matter how you look at it."

She was right in that my Vision, with which I could foresee death, would not be of great use in a matter that wasn't one of life or death.

"I explained the situation to you. Now get back to work and watch the store."

"Understood," Saki obediently said as she stood up. However, I was still sitting on the sofa.

"Is there anything I can help with?"

"Nothing. I just told you that, didn't I?"

"It's almost closing time anyway. I would love to help out with something!" I countered.

"And what would that be? Hm?"

"But... I'm sure I could do one thing or another..."

Watching me keeping trying, Towako-san gave me a doubtful look.

"You just wanna go to the casino, right?"

...Exactly.

I was convinced that it was normal for a high school student to have a certain admiration an "adult" place like this. Had it been a simple game arcade, I would have gone home without a second thought, but I was bent to rave a bit longer in the special atmosphere of a real casino.

By far the greatest part of the guests were adults, but there were also a few university students. Their presence allowed me to pretend to be their age, although I did

look a bit younger than them. If something made me stand out then it was probably my clumsy way of wearing a suit.

The casual clothes I'd worn while watching the shop were deemed as inappropriate, and therefore I had Erika lend me some apparel. It was pretty awkward wearing a dark-gray suit on a white shirt with a black tie.

Moreover...

"And here's your pocket money," Erika said and handed me 100 casino chips. Saki and I were supposed to get one half each. One chip was worth 1,000 yen, which meant that we had just received 100,000[2] yen from her.

Originally, I considered spending 1,000 to 2,000 yen on my own, but according to her that was nowhere enough in this kind of facility, so she made us this present out of goodwill.

"C-Can we really have so much...?"

"It's okay. Think of it as hush money. Because if everyone knows about this place tomorrow, I'll have you pay me back tenfold."

"....."

I'll take that back. No goodwill involved.

Her emphatic smile made me swear to myself that I would not utter a peep about this casino.

"Also, do keep to slot machines and roulette if you want to play. In card games, you risk owing more than you can pay because your bet depends on your opponent ," Erika explained.

I see. I'll keep that in mind.

"Enjoy yourselves a bit while Towako and I are coming up with a plan. Looks like your companion has just come , too."

With these words, she left the room and in her stead someone else entered. It was Saki. Like me, Saki naturally also had to change her clothes.

I got to wear a suit, and she got to wear a Chinese dress.

The sleeveless dress clung to her skin, flattering her delicate curves. Although black in color of course, it was embroidered with silver thread and made for a quite magnificent sight. On top of that, she had put her hair up and even wore some makeup to match the atmosphere of the establishment, giving off a more mature impression than usual.

Not to say that she wouldn't normally mind her appearance, but because she was usually wearing unremarkable black clothes, I was somewhat surprised by how well a luxurious getup suited her.

...I've just admitted that it suits her, haven't I...?

"What's wrong, Tokiya?"

"Oh, I just thought that you're wearing black again," I noted without stating my real impressions.

"Of course I am," she replied in a manner as if to say that I should have taken this for granted. "And you are wearing a suit, Tokiya. It suits you better than I expected, " she continued.

"Well, thanks."

She got ahead of me; I lost my chance to tell her my honest impressions. Not that I wanted to praise her.

"Where do we start?" she asked.

"How about checking out the slots?"

I decided to respect the piece of advice Erika had given me.

"...I've lost."

My chips disappeared inside the slot machine in a matter of minutes. The term "beginner's luck" turned out to be a downright lie; not a single time did I get a line.

"Well, that's how it goes."

If I had the luck to make a fortune with the slots, I wouldn't be worrying about having something to eat everyday.

Yeah, that's how it goes. I'm normal.

...But still... wouldn't it be okay to live the dream for a few moments?

I'm not talking about making a big haul... just, would it be so unforgivable if a few chips remained in my hands so I could treat myself to a nice, big dinner?

Oh man, I should have immediately changed my tokens into real cash. Damn, I'm really starting to regret not doing just that.

I hated myself for thoughtlessly blowing my 50 chips.

"Alright, how's Saki doing?"

Since she didn't known how to play the slots, Saki had been looking over my shoulders and watching me play for a while, but then she felt cold and went off to fetch something to wear over her dress. Neither of us had expected that my money would run out so quickly, which is why I'd told her that I would be waiting here.

Because I couldn't keep sitting at a slot machine without any chips to spend, I stood up and went looking for Saki on the risk of her coming back and not finding me.

Apart from the slots, I came across tables where they played roulette or tables where they played a card game. Around one of them a crowd had formed.

Curious as to what was going on, I approached the table and poked my head through the crowd to take a look. They were playing a card game. At the other table I'd come by they had been playing black jack, but at this one they were having a different game.

The match seemed to take place between two guests. On one side was an approximately 30-year-old man with a sour face, and on the other side was a girl with—contrary to him—no expression at all.

Huh? It's Saki...

"Saki?"

"Oh, Tokiya," she said upon noticing me as she turned around.

Realizing that we knew each other, the crowd split between us, allowing me to walk up to Saki.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked her in a reproachful tone because she was playing a card game instead of the slots.

"On my way to find a jacket I was approached by someone and I ended up here."

Apparently, Saki had been challenged to a game before she knew it. The opponent had probably in mind to get some money off her because she looked like a clueless girl.

This is bad. Erika mentioned that unlike with slot machines, the bet can be raised in card games.

"Saki, how's the match go..." While asking, I saw the dealer bring a mountain of chips to her. There were roughly thrice as many chips as the 50 chips before.

A moment later, her opponent let his head droop.

"I couldn't read her face at all. How can you stay so calm with such a piss-poor hand...?" he muttered, and shortly after, the audience applauded Saki's flawless victory.

"You've won?"

"It seems so."

"How?"

"I just played the game. But I suppose you can say that my daily efforts to provide excellent customer service have enabled me to win," she explained, completely losing me. "My ultimate goal has always been to predict and cater for the customer's needs in an appropriate manner. I must have acquired this skill without my knowledge, which is why I was able to win in a card game like this that is all about outwitting the opponent."

"Cool. By the way, what game were you playing?"

Saki replied with her usual expressionless face:

"Poker."

Poker face.

No matter what she told herself, *that* was her talent. Customer service, on the other hand, was what she was bad at. Of course, she wasn't at all aware of that herself.

I felt that I knew how she had won.

I pitied the man who thought he could win against Saki in poker. There was no way a stranger could read her face when even I had a hard time guessing what she was thinking. Her opponent had probably lost his composure while watching her calmly swap cards, and either took a reckless gamble or folded his hand because he got scared.

In other words, he had shot himself in the foot.

Damn, do you call that "beginner's luck", too? I thought as I got slightly jealous of her stroke of luck. And of the pile of chips before her.

"Let's go, Tokiya," Saki said while standing up, without showing any greed for money. "Here, take this."

She gave me half of her chips.

"Are you sure?"

"I want to try out the slot machine. Teach me how to play."

"This will do for my tuition." I took 50 chips and returned the rest to her. I had also considered giving up the whole sum, but I decided to accept the favor rather than playing goody-goody.

Just when we were headed to the slots, someone cut off our way.

"You wouldn't be so kind as to accept a challenge from yours truly?"

It was a pompous man who wore rings and pendants and other jewelry and had his long hair tied up at his back. Unlike me, his black suited him perfectly, which was partially because of his mature age of late twenties.

"No, I do not intend to play any more games."

"Are you just going to take your winnings and quit?" he kept insisting when Saki tried to leave. "I'm sure that the ladies and gentlemen here would be excited to see some more!" he addressed the spectators. He was deliberately trying to convince them that Saki was supposed to accept the challenge.

Saki gave me a look. She didn't look particularly troubled, but I gathered that she wanted me to decide.

There were probably only three things that entered my mind at that moment: aversion to his attitude, faith in Saki's poker face, and delight in the mountain of chips that had formed before Saki earlier.

"You should give him that chance."

I would soon regret these words.

"We've lost..."

They played a quick game for 100 chips. Saki lost that match and her opponent won.

All the chips on the table went to the man who introduced himself as Kirishima.

Well, it can't be helped. I guess beginner's luck doesn't last long. It was somewhat of a let-down indeed, but we hadn't paid for the chips in the first place, so we didn't sustain a loss. I would have loved to avenge Saki, but I wanted to save those 50 chips from her so that could play the slots together.

The reason why Saki had accepted Kirishima's proposal of doing the showdown for their bets of 100 chips each was probably because she wanted to get over with it quickly. In fact, thanks to her defeat, we could now go without anyone complaining.

"Let's go, Saki," I said and wanted to leave.

However, I received an unexpected remark.

"You haven't paid up yet," Kirishima pointed out as he tapped the table with his finger.

"She paid her bet, didn't she?"

"But she hasn't paid mine yet."

What is he talking about? Saki's bet of 100 chips Saki had gone to him. To confirm that I wasn't mistaken, I gave the dealer an inquiring look.

"The debt has indeed not been paid yet," he said.

I looked at Saki, but she was just as confused as me and inclined her head.

"Don't you even know the rules or what?" Kirishima sighed with amusement and gave us an explanation.

I realized that I've held a misconception.

All parties make their bets and add to the pot when they get the chance to draw new cards. If they feel confident, they can raise the bet, otherwise they can keep the bet as is. If they see no chances to win, they can fold their hand and give up.[3]

My understanding was correct so far. What Saki and I had misunderstood, however, was how the pot was handled in this casino.

We thought that if you won, you would get the bets of all players and if you lost, you would have to pay your bet. That was only true in the case of giving up.

If you stayed in the game until the showdown, the winner could collect the players' bets from them plus his own bet from the loser, whereas the loser lost his bet and had to pay the winner's bet as well.

Kirishima had bet 100 chips. Saki had also bet 100 chips, and she lost. In other words, she owed him a total of 200 chips.

Actually, that rule made sense: this casino's rules didn't require the players' bets to be equal, so there would be no point in raising one's own bet if the winner only received the pot. We could have noticed if we'd paid more attention.

"Got it? Can I have my 100 chips now?"

I didn't have another 100 chips—or 100,000 yen—with me. All that I had were the 50 chips I'd gotten from Saki earlier, but that was only half of the amount and I didn't carry around the 50,000 yen required to buy the remaining 50 chips.

I exchanged glances with Saki. She naturally shook her head, signaling me that she hadn't enough money either.

I took out my cell phone to give Towako-san a call, but the cell got no signal because we were underground.

No choice. I'll go looking for her and borrow the money from her.

"We don't have the money right now, but I'm off borrowing it from someone. Wait a moment," I said.

However, Kirishima did not approve.

"You think you can escape?"

"As I said, I'm only going to borrow some money. I can't pay you without money."

"Do you seriously think you'll get through with that? How do I know that you will come back and bring me my money?" he countered.

"I'll leave these 50 chips here. Okay?"

"Are you dumb or what? I'd still suffer a loss of 50 chips if you escaped."

"It was *you* who insisted on playing a game. Be a bit cooperative."

"That doesn't matter. You should have given up if you can't pay the debt."

"But..."

"You didn't know the rules? Don't give me that lame excuse," he said, cutting me short.

I clenched my teeth because he had taken the words right out of my mouth.

"It's your fault if you fancied playing a game without even knowing the rules. You're even worse for gambling with someone else's money and having someone else play in your stead. This is no place for a sissy like you."

As much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't deny what he'd said. I should have just ignored his provocative challenge and gone to the slots.

But it was too late for remorse.

"So what *do* you want?" I asked tiredly.

"Well..." he started and turned his eyes at Saki who was sitting next to me. "Why don't you pay with her?"

"Wha..." His sudden request left me flabbergasted. " Cut the bullshit!"

"This isn't bullshit, boy. I shouldn't have to remind what happens if you can't pay your debts, right?"

"But I will give you your stupid money!"

"It doesn't matter if you can't pay *now*."

"...You were after her from the start," I pointed out.

Was it all for this? His talking us into playing against him? His betting big money, knowing that we had not enough?

Kirishima put on a silent grin in response to my mutter .

"She doesn't belong together with a moron like you," he spit out and smiled at Saki. "Don't you agree? You've had enough of that simpleton, right?"

"Come off it! We're not going to accept these terms. Now stay put. I'm off to fetch your money," I said, forcefully putting a stop to the discussion, and wanted to be gone with Saki.

"Fine."

However, Saki refused me and agreed to Kirishima's offer instead.

"Hey, Saki!"

She stood up and walked to Kirishima.

"You're a clever girl. You're better off with me than with that broke, brainless boy," he said.

"....."

"Although it looks like you beg to differ?" Kirishima noted.

"There's one condition." Saki imposed a condition upon him in return for agreeing to his demand. "You must play against Tokiya."

Kirishima listened to what she had to say in a calm manner.

"As soon as Tokiya has earned back the loss I've made—in other words when he bets 100 chips—I'll have you bet me," she explained.

"Very well. I'll accept your terms. But if he loses, I'll have you listen to me!"

"Fine."

"Hey, Saki!" I exclaimed her name again. This time, she didn't ignore me.

"It's okay."

"How is that okay?!"

You don't mean to tell me that you have to take the blame because it's you who started with playing cards, right? That's not the problem here! Do you understand that...?!

I was so angry at Saki for readily agreeing to Kirishima's demand that I was at a loss for words.

However, Saki had something different in mind entirely. Her reasons were of no such negative nature.

"You're going to win me back, Tokiya, aren't you?" she calmly explained. There was no change in her expression, no fear in her eyes, and no hesitation in her voice.

Since it wasn't possible to read anything off he face, I could only guess. But probably—most likely—she was—

"You're so sweet when you're angry, my dear," Kirishima joked with a wry smile.

I ignored him, however, and gazed at Saki.

She gazed back at me, still expressionless.

"Do win, Tokiya."

Frankly, I was not interested in the girl.

Claiming that I was after her was horribly missing the mark. He had to be joking. She looked pleasant to the eye indeed, but I had no thing for taking advantage of little girls.

On the contrary, it infuriated me that a financially weak child like her would be so thoughtless as to come to a place like this. I categorized her as naive kid.

When I approached her, I merely intended to teach her a lesson about life. Perhaps you could call that "being after her."

However, when her friend showed up, I changed my mind. I tried provoking him a little and he was so dumb as to accept my challenge.

Having seen how she stepped out after one game, I figured that she was only accompanying him and that he was the embodiment of the aimlessness, recklessness and spontaneity that I hated so much.

I planned to give him that time he needed to come up with the money, provided that he showed some insight by begging me for mercy, but all he did was turning a blind eye to his own lack of thought and being insolent with me.

I would have spared the girl if she had been bright enough to abandon him, but she seemed to be beyond help if she still didn't wake up.

I was going to make those two bitterly regret what they'd done.

They were naive to think they could win against me.

I'll fulfill my duty as an adult and teach them a lesson about life.

Have fun regretting. I hope you'll learn how to use your heads.

Needless to say, the game we were going to play was poker.

I silently repeated the definite rules to myself.

The rules were largely the same as the usual poker rules, meaning that the point was to get the right combinations of suits and ranks. A joker was added to the deck as an almighty wild card.

In the beginning, five cards were to be distributed to the players after which they were to place their initial bets. After picking up their hands, the players could then decide whether or not to continue the game. In the case of continuing, they could optionally raise their bets.

In his turn, the player could either tell the dealer to " raise" his bet, to "call" and keep the bet as is, to "fold" his hand and give up, or to "stay" and leave both the bet and his hand unchanged.

When staying in the game, the player was allowed to swap some of his cards up to two times. However, he was also allowed to "fold" after swapping his cards twice.

When losing the game, the player had to pay the sum of his stake plus the winner's stake, and when giving up he had to pay only his own stake.

The rules were more complicated and the names a bit different in a full-fledged casino, but that was the gist of it.

"Comprende?"

"Spare me you sarcasm," I replied as coldly as possible and focused on the game.

The cards were distributed and it was time to place our first bets.

"Bet."

I placed a safe bet of 5 chips, while Kirishio started off with 10. He hadn't placed as much as in the game against Saki, either because he was on the watch or because he planned on toying with me.

I picked up my cards. I had a pair of fours—hearts and spades—in my hand. The remaining cards were jumbled, consisting of the ace of clubs, the 5 of hearts, and the 9 of diamonds.

Kirishima was still smiling as he looked at his own hand.

"I raise," he said as he placed five more chips on the table. He also swapped 3 cards.

"I call." I left my bet untouched and swapped 2 cards, leaving only my pair and my ace.

That's more like it, I rejoiced in my head when I looked at my new cards. I had just received the ace and the 2 of spades. I had two pairs.

"I call." Kirishima also left his bet untouched this time and swapped 3 cards again.

"I call." I threw away the 2 of spades and exchanged it with the ace of diamonds. I had three of a kind and one pair, or in other words, a full house.

"Showdown," the dealer announced and we revealed our hands.

Kirishima's hand contained a pair of kings.

"Mr. Kurusu wins the game."

My bet of 5 chips returned to me twofold along with the additional 15 chips Kirishima had placed. Simply put, he paid me 20 chips.

I now had a total of 70 chips.

"Starts off promising for you, doesn't it?" Kirishima praised me in a leisure manner.

You'll soon be laughing out of the other side of your face!

The next game started. I bet 5 chips, Kirishima bet 10.

I started off with three fives, which ensured that I could make at least a three-of-a-kind. If I managed to draw a pair of any cards on top of that, I would have a full house again. If I drew another 5, on the other hand, I would have four of a kind.

"I fold," Kirishima declared just when I thought I could win. "Because you seem to have a good hand."

Dammit! I let it show on my face!

I had won this game, but because he had given up, I only received the pot, leaving me with a total of 80 chips.

The next game started and the cards were dealt facedown. The bets stayed the same as before: 5 on my behalf and 10 on Kirishima's.

I picked up my cards. My hand consisted of the 2 of hearts, the 4 of spades, the ace of clubs, the 7 of hearts and the king of hearts. The ranks and suits were all over the place.

I still tried to keep a poker face so as to not leak my poor hand.

What do I do? Should I give up? Which cards should I swap ?

"I raise." Kirishima increased his bet by 10 chips.

Apparently, he had a good hand. My gut was telling me that I could not win with these cards.

"I fold," I therefore said, discarding my hand.

With a sardonic grin on his face, Kirishima showed my his cards, which were just a diverse as mine. I had been tricked. He had only raised his bet in order to trick me into giving up.

Kirishima had won this game and received my stake of 5 chips. I was left with 75 chips.

The next game started. Our bets remained at 5 and 10 respectively.

I had the 2 of hearts, the 2 of clubs, the 3 of diamonds, the 3 of spades, and the king of diamonds, or two pairs for short. It was a fairly good hand.

"I raise," I said as I added 5 chips to my bet, and swapped one card.

"I call." Kirishima left his bet unchanged and swapped three cards.

I looked at the face of my new card, the 3 of clubs. I had a full house. That was awesome.

"I fold."

However, just when I was delighted by my hand, Kirishima discarded his.

I had 85 chips now; my stock was growing slowly but steadily.

"We won't get anywhere if we keep folding all the time ," he remarked.

"It's only the fourth game."

But Kirishima had a point there: it was hard to amass chips if both parties kept giving up. I deemed it reasonable to believe in my current streak of luck and become a bit more offensive.

The next game started and we both bet 10 chips.

"Oh, taking the offensive?"

"Because you funded me."

The cards dealt to me were the queens of hearts and diamonds, and the joker. The joker could be played as any card, meaning that I effectively had three queens. While the remaining cards were random, I could consider myself lucky.

"I raise."

Kirishima raised his bet by 5 chips and swapped two cards. By the looks of it, he was confident in his hand. *Either a pair or three of a kind*, I guessed, but if he really had three of a kind, then mine was likely to win because of the queens' high rank.

"I raise," I said and put another 10 chips on my bet. I also swapped two cards.

The audience started to grow noisy because both players seemed to have faith in their hands.

—Hell yeah.

I drew the queen of spades. My four-of-a-kind was complete.

"I raise." Kirishima also increased his bet, by 5 chips, and swapped two cards. I gathered that he had a real good hand.

"I raise."

I added 5 chips and swapped one card. I had started this game off with 85 chips, of which I had bet 25, whereas Kirishima had bet 20 chips. If I won, I would have more than 100 chips and could challenge him for Saki.

The card I got was the king of spades and thus meaningless, but I could win this game nonetheless. While praying that he didn't fold, I looked at him.

Since I was still in the game and had only swapped one card, it was most likely obvious to him that I had more than three of a kind. Put the other way, the fact that he hadn't folded either suggested that he was fairly confident himself.

But surely he isn't expecting four queens.

"Showdown," the dealer proclaimed.

In an attempt to show off, I boldly dropped my cards on the table. The kings and queens were apparently displeased by my behavior, however: two of the cards ended up facedown, making me appear like a fool.

"That's not going to cut it," Kirishima declared without even deigning to inspect my hand.

But he had told the truth and played 4 aces.

"Wha..."

There was a stir in the audience because of his surprisingly strong hand.

I clenched my teeth. I had not at all anticipated to lose with four queens.

"Mr. Kurusu...?" the dealer said with an asking look.

"Fuck!" I flicked my tongue and exposed my losing hand by turning up the queen and king.

The audience also marveled at my strong hand and applauded us.

But defeat is defeat.

"Mr. Kirishima wins the game," the dealer stated the obvious.

I paid a total of 45 chips, consisting of the 25 chips I had placed and the 20 chips my opponent had placed. My stock of 85 chips had dwindled to a mere 40 in just one game. It was a painful loss.

"What a shame! Really! You almost got me to bet the girl!" he ridiculed me with every of his words pissing me off. "Actually, I only had a pair before the last swapping. You were so close! It's a real shame."

"Good for you."

"Who knows, maybe God wants me to win?"

"Shut up and play," I uttered, urging him to continue with the next game instead of rambling on.

I looked at Saki. She was watching us play without showing any stirring of disappointment.

Hold on. I'm absolutely going to retrieve you.

Looks like you didn't expect your four queens to be beaten. Your face is all screwed up!

The girl was way better at keeping a poker face.

But you don't stand a chance against me no matter how good your poker face is and no matter how lucky you are.

If you think you're just out of luck, then you're on the wrong track.

Because, well, I can literally tell what cards you have.

Let me explain myself once more:

I'm going to teach you a lesson about life—about how tough and unfair life is.

"Tch!"

I lost two times in a row.

Even though I was still winning more often than him on the whole, my chips had been decimated to a mere 20. It was like I were winning all battles but losing the war.

The next game started. I bet 5 chips, Kirishima bet 10 chips.

I had a pair in my hand. That was by no means a bad setup. I left my bet untouched and swapped the other 3 cards. Kirishima did the same.

Does he also have a pair?

I picked up my new cards. Among them were the 6 of hearts and the 6 of clubs, forming a second pair.

I sneaked a peek at Kirishima, who was still smiling comfortably. *Is his smile true or false?* I asked myself.

"I call," I said and swapped the remaining card.

"I raise." He put another 5 chips on his stack and exchanged one card.

Does he also have two pairs? Or three of a kind even?

My remaining assets amounted to 20 chips, my bet was 5 chips and his bet was 15. If I were to lose this game , the duel would be over.

Two pairs were a somewhat weak hand for a final showdown.

Do I retreat?

No, I mustn't. Don't chicken out, Tokiya. You have two pairs. The next card could get you a full house. Hang on.

"I call," I said and simply swapped one card. However, the card was different from the other ones and left with with two pairs.

"I call."

Kirishima could bankrupt me with his current bet, so there was no point in raising it. He swapped one card. *One card, eh...* I sighed to myself. *Two pairs? Four of a kind? Which is it?*

If I gave up, I would only lose 5 chips and could continue.

Kirishima was still smirking. That smile was also a poker face of sorts; I couldn't for the life of me read anything off it.

What do I do? Try my luck or retreat?

If I took the risk, I would end up with a total of either 40 or 0 chips. It was all or nothing. But if I folded, I would still have 15 chips left.

What do I do...? I asked myself again.

Kirishima showed no sign of giving up, from which I guessed that he either had a strong hand or that he wanted to drive me into folding.

What do I do...?

I wasn't able to read anything off his face. If anything, he seemed to be waiting for my decision.

His smile pisses me off.

He's waiting for me to back out.

I won't. I won't give up this game.

Showdown!

"I fold," he said in the very moment I came to a decision, avoiding a showdown. "Because I can't win with this hand."

Kirishima only had a pair of twos—the weakest hand in the game. It boggled my mind that he could act so calm with a poor hand like that. He had only swapped the same number of cards in order to get me to fold.

Dammit, he's toying with me!

"Hey, cheer up. You won this game."

My chips had indeed increased to 35. I had overcome the critical point for the time being.

Still, I had less than I had at the beginning.

There was no point in winning if I failed at getting Saki back, and I didn't even have half of the sum needed for that.

"Shit!"

Again! Even though I was on the winning side, my money kept decreasing, leaving me with 20 chips.

I always won because Kirishima folded. Therefore, I couldn't properly increase my number of chips. Kirishima, on the other hand, kept winning the full stake.

But he's good, I had to admit against my will. Whenever I had a strong hand, he would minimize his losses by folding, and whenever I had a moderate hand, he would keep his bets so low that I could not bring myself to fold. Even worse, sometimes he would drive me into folding when his own hand was actually weak, but when I tried to read ahead and risked a showdown, his hand would prove strong.

I was pretty proud of my poker face, but it seemed like he could easily see through it. He probably didn't let the slightest of stirrings in my face slip, I assessed.

Considering that he had won against Saki, it was well possible that seeing through me was a walk in the park for him.

The game progressed.

I had three of a kind, but Kirishima folded. I won 5 chips.

I had two pairs, but Kirishima folded. I won 5 chips.

I had a pair, but I lost the showdown and 10 chips.

I had a full house, but Kirishima folded yet again. I won 5 chips.

I had no hand, and neither did Kirishima, but I folded and lost 5 chips.

...Overall, my stock of chips had decreased even more and was still shrinking slowly but surely.

It was like being corroded by a slow poison, like being tormented by slow degrees. Step by step he was driving me to the brink of collapse.

"Hm... somewhat disappointing," he suddenly said.

"Spare me your words."

"Hey, I was talking of myself, you know?" he explained with amazement while giving me an exaggerated shrug. All of that rubbed me the wrong way. "Why don't you relax a bit? It's just a game for crying out loud, isn't it?"

"Just a 'game' you say?"

There was no way I could enjoy this when Saki was at stake. Although she was silently watching our game, she was bound to be upset inside.

"Oh right, the girl's at stake. I was so absorbed in playing that I forgot entirely."

You don't say, I thought. *You're not enjoying the game, you're enjoying toying with me.*

Kirishima always wore a cool smile. Perhaps he was still holding back. No, actually, he was quite clearly just messing with me.

As though he really knew my cards.

Hm? Does he really know my cards?

As a matter of fact, so far he had been responding to my hands with a precision that bordered on cheating.

I let my gaze wander around; around us was a crowd of spectators watching our duel. I started to suspect that there was someone among them who gave Kirishima signals.

For a fact, I hadn't paid attention to what was happening behind my back.

...I picked up my cards while hiding them with my body from curious eyes and fanned them without letting down my guard.

I had a pair.

Cool with me! I'll take the gamble!

Even though I only had a weak hand, I increased my bet by 5 to a total of 10 chips.

"Now look at that, how bold! A good hand, I take it?"

I kept staring at my cards without reacting to him.

Kirishima also raised his bet to 10 chips.

He's testing me.

But this is where it counts. I'll stand my ground.

If he followed his behavior pattern up to now, he was going to fold. Even if he didn't, I would be getting 20 chips if I won. My hand might have been only a pair, but it was a pair of kings, the second highest rank of cards. It was by no means a bad hand.

"Showdown."

I played a pair of kings.

Kirishima slowly exposed his own hand. It was—

A pair of aces. I lost. I had to drop 20 chips.

...Quite the feat to appear so self-confident with just two aces.

"I don't have any accomplices, lad, but we can send our audience away, if you like...?"

There was no need asking him how he could tell. He had simply observed my hiding my cards and studying my surroundings. Even I would have notice.

Put the other way, I was so tense as to fail to notice such obvious things.

"Very well, you're in a tight corner now." He stated the obvious.

The number of my remaining chips was 5.

The game before had been a gamble—a gamble that I lost.

He was reading me like a book; my face and my gestures seemed to give me away.

My "petty" strategies are not going to cut it, or what?

Blaming him for cheating would've been nothing more than a lame excuse: Kirishima didn't show any signs thereof, nor did he have someone spy on my cards.

I was weak. I had to admit it.

I gazed at Saki. She silently gazed back—without averting her eyes.

Saki had not given up just yet.

In that case, I was in no position to give up, either.

"You'd better give up now. You can save yourself some trouble this way."

"I'm already in trouble up to my neck," I replied.

"Relax, boy. I'll give her back to you once I'm done playing with her," he said as he extended his hand toward Saki to stroke her cheek.

"Don't you touch her!" I roared, putting a stop to that farce.

Kirishima frowned with annoyance and yanked at Saki's hair. Her face contorted with pain as she lost her balance and fell down on her knees.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" I yelled as I stood up, but Saki's "Tokiya..." kept me from charging at him.

"You have no right to object, lad. Right now, she's mine."

"Don't treat Saki like a thing!"

"Says the guy who gambled her away?"

You're one to talk! I didn't gamble with Saki, I didn't want to pay with her—YOU made me!

However, for some reason I failed to object aloud. Perhaps I felt like he was spot on somewhere in my heart .

"Tokiya, I gambled myself away, not you. There is no need for you to blame yourself even if you lost."

"No man should make a girl say something like that," Kirishima scoffed, turning Saki's cheering against me.

Although, to be honest, I had to give him right on that; I was embarrassed and angered by myself for making Saki say that.

"Tokiya, this man is trying to provoke you."

"I know!"

I know..., I repeated in mind and told myself to keep a level head. Observing this attempt at calming down, Kirishima laughed again; all he did, all he said was raising my hackles.

"The game's not over yet! Next game!" I commanded.

"Fine with me, of course."

Without any more words, the cards were dealt and we both placed the minimum bet of 5 chips, which was all the remaining money I had. In other words, I could not fold let alone lose.

If I lost, my defeat would be set in stone.

Am I going to lose? Am I going to fail rescuing Saki?

What should I do? How can I win?

Think, Tokiya! Just playing isn't going to cut it; Kirishima is more skilled than me. I can't win just so.

Isn't there something I can do to elevate my chances? Something... is there really no way?

Damn it... a proper Relic would be worth a mint now...!

Krrrrr!

The sound of Kirishima dropping the 5 chips he was adding to his bet brought me back to reality. They rolled all the way to me.

"Pardon me, my hand slipped," he apologized as he received his chips from me.

Did something happen?

There was nothing special about slipping one's hand, but for some reason there was a hint of disbelief on his face.

Is he surprised because he let his hand slip? No, that's not it . What happened, then? Did his accomplice blunder, if he has one now?

I tried looking around, but there was nothing that caught my eye.

I looked at Kirishima; the same smile as before was glued to his face, but this time it looked somewhat phony .

However, other than that nothing had changed.

Am I seeing things? Did he simply drop his chips, after all?

Suddenly, the lights in the floor died all at once.

Everyone began muttering about the sudden blackout.

"Dear guests, please keep calm and stay where you are !" the dealer shouted into the dark, after which I heard the vibration of a cell phone before me. "...I'm afraid there has been a power outage, but the problem is currently being worked on. Please safeguard your valuables and wait a moment."

Just when he had finished speaking, the emergency lights went on and lit the hall. The light was far weaker than before, but it was enough to see.

The visitors sighed with relief.

"Please pardon the inconvenience, but I must ask you to suspend the game for now and take a break. Of course I will look that no alternations are made to the game," the dealer said, and an employee brought Kirishima a glass of mineral water. Using this momentary blind spot, the dealer showed me his cell phone.

The text on the display said, "Get your ass over to the restroom."

I had a hunch about who wrote that message.

Without much ado, I stood up and gave Saki a node, since I could not take her with me, and headed to the restroom.

At my destination I found Towako-san and Erika waiting for me.

"Bloody idiot!" Towako-san cursed before saying anything else and gave me a whack on the head.

"Didn't I tell you not to gamble with others?" Erika sighed then. Before I could apologize, however, she continued, "It's the man we were talking about."

The man we had been talking about—in other words the gambler who didn't lose. And I had been so stupid as to challenge him to a duel. I was at a loss for words at my own dullness.

"The problem is how do we beat him?" Towako-san said. Apparently, she was already in the picture; I guessed that an employee had informed her.

"Can you lend me some money? I'll give him the pending sum and call it..."

"Are you daft or what?" Towako-san grumbled. "Do you seriously believe money is going to get you out of that? Dollars to donuts, he's not going to give Saki-chan back unless you win her back."

She was right; the situation had changed. I didn't need 100 chips to pay him, I needed them to have him bet Saki .

"And? Noticed anything while fighting him?"

"He's strong. A beginner like me holds no candle to him."

"That's not what I'm asking, genius."

"Huh?"

"Oh come on, don't lose your head just because someone took Saki away from you. What I want to know is whether or not he is using a Relic!"

"Ah..."

I'd almost forgotten. The very reason why Towako-san had come here in the first place was to make sure if Kirishima was using a Relic.

"Did he show any signs of using a Relic?"

"...I didn't see any. He was just playing poker. He doesn't seem to have any accomplices either," I answered .

"I also considered this possibility and had my men look out for his friends, but we didn't find anything of the sort. There's no one who's always here when he is," Erika said and proceeded with an explanation of Kirishima's characteristics. "From what I can tell, he only plays card games, like poker and black jack. I also spotted him playing the slots once or twice, but he

doesn't seem to have as much luck with that. His tactical play when playing at cards is quite the spectacle, though. He's excellent at finding the right timing to avoid risky situations, and he knows when to fold and when to raise. "

"Agreed. It's perfectly possible to win a round or two, but he would always fold when I had a good hand and lure me out when I was not sure what to think of my cards..."

"So it's not a Relic that ensures that you win every gamble, eh? If he sucks at playing the slots, it can't be a lucky Relic either. It's one that only works on other people, I guess... To be honest, I wanted to play a game against him and see for myself, but that will be a waste of time if you didn't find anything, Tokiya."

Towako-san drew her conclusions after hearing us out, and came to an answer:

"In my view, I suspect his Relic gives him the power to see through things."

"See through things?" I asked.

"Yeah. Do you remember the round where you almost won with four of a kind?"

"Ah, yes."

"That was very suspicious," claimed Towako-san.

"Huh?"

What is she talking about? I didn't notice anything of the sort.

"Two cards fell facedown when you exposed your hand. And even though he could only see a set of queens, Kirishima openly declared himself the winner with a quad of aces."

"How is that suspicious?"

"The visible cards may have been queens, but one of them was a joker. In other words, the two cards that were facedown could have been both queens. In that case, you would have had five of a kind," she explained.

"Ah!"

Thinking back at it, the dealer hadn't announced Kirishima's victory until seeing all my cards either. Put another way, it wasn't clear yet whether or not Kirishima had won.

Despite that, he declared himself the winner.

At the time I supposed that he was simply confident in his quad of aces, but there was more to it.

That would also explain why Saki had lost: even the best poker face is useless if the opponent sees your cards.

"The question is how far he can see through things. If you can't hide your cards by covering them, you'll have to win against him with overt cards," she added.

"...Erika, would it be possible to leave the lights as dim as they are now?" I asked.

"Making it at least harder for him to see your cards, eh ?"

"I can arrange that, but so long as you have no definite proof of his Relic abuse, I can't save you. As a casino, we can't presume to accuse a guest of trickery and then find nothing thereof."

Doing something like that would stain their reputation indeed, which is why Erika had only asked Towako-san to confirm the presence or absence of a Relic.

"That's the only countermeasure we have at the moment," I said. "Anyway, while I'm trying to draw out the match, please try to determine his Relic. He's not wearing glasses, so it might be contact lenses, but I don't know."

I didn't expect to win against an opponent who could see my cards, but we couldn't accuse him of foul play without knowing what Relic he had, either.

Therefore, all I could do was to prolong our match until Towako-san had seen through his trick.

"You're not thinking that drawing the match out is all you can do, right?" Towako-san made a remark that was spot-on. "With that mindset you're not going to win even a normal match! I'll take care of the Relic, so man up and concentrate on kicking his ass when you go out there, OK ?"

"Yes."

Thanks to her spurring me on, I finally dropped the passive thinking.

She's absolutely right. My luck's going to drain away, too, if I keep running away myself. I'm going to win even if he can see my cards!

"Just recall how angry she got for your sake! You wouldn't be a man if you didn't return the favor!"

I know.

The only reason why Saki agreed on giving herself away was because Kirishima had made a fool of me—

Because she was mad at him for mocking me.

That's why she gave me the opportunity to avenge myself.

"Who do you think I am, Towako-san? I'm not *that* dull ."

"Good to hear!" she said and walked off.

"Huh? When was she angry?" I heard Erika say while following Towako-san. I put on a faint smile.

Erika couldn't know.

She couldn't know of the angry emotions that were hiding behind that expressionless countenance. Towako-san and I were the only ones who knew her well enough to tell.

Yeah, only the two of us...

"—Huh?"

It was then that a certain quote crossed my mind.

You're so sweet when you're angry, my dear.

Kirishima had said these words.

How? How could he tell that Saki was angry? Did his poker skills allow him to see through her blank expression?

No... no way. It must be something else. No matter how good he is at gambling, that's not possible.

The feelings hiding behind Saki's expressionless face aren't meant to be understood by someone who doesn't even know her .

"But then how...?"

How did he notice that she was angry...?

When I returned to the table, the dealer didn't miss a beat and said, "I'm afraid that restoring the lights is going to take more time than anticipated, but if both parties agree, we can resume the game despite the poor lighting conditions."

Apparently, Erika had already gotten in touch with the dealer.

"Oh, I don't mind. It's not going to take more than one or two rounds anyway," Kirishima said.

"I don't mind, either."

I sat down in my seat and gazed at him. He gazed back .

But I didn't wait for him.

"It's your turn."

—No, it's my turn.

I denied my own words with a slight delay in my thoughts.

Even though he was about to swap some cards, thinking it was his turn, he suddenly stopped. As if reacting to my delayed "No, it's my turn."

Kirishima gazed at me again. I returned his gaze and came to a conclusion.

He is reading my mind—

My Relic—Mind's Voice—allows me to read someone else's mind.

I sure didn't expect a child like him to know of the existence of Relics, let alone to find me out and notice that I'm reading his mind... knocking over my chips when I picked up the term "Relic" in his thinking must have struck him as suspicious.

But what of it? How is that knowledge going to help him?

—But it's hardly possible to prove that he's cheating...!

The boy's thinking entered my head.

...Exactly. You're not as stupid as you look; that's a relief! I'll take back calling you an idiot.

He can find me out as much as he wants, but he can't prove anything. I can just feign ignorance if he points it out.

There's hardly anyone in this casino who knows about Relics. He'd appear like a fool who's making up things to avoid losing. No one's going to believe that boy.

So, what are you going to do?

Learning about Mind's Voice isn't going to save you from your certain defeat.

You can't mute your inner voice, lad.

What next? I see now that he's reading my mind, but that's it. I can't point this out to everyone.

Even if I came out with the truth behind his Relic now, Erika and her employees' hands would still be tied. Everything would be fine and dandy if he was cheating in an obvious way, but in this case it would seem like I was just trying to drag him through the mud.

In the worst case, I'd get disqualified and lose my chance to get Saki back.

"Let's continue," smirked Kirishima.

We resumed the game. I had 5 chips remaining, and we had both bet 5 chips.

The game was over for good if I were to fold or lose.

I took a look at my cards.

...No hand at all. Off to a good start...

"Ah!" I gasped, realizing that Kirishima was reading my mind.

I mustn't think. I must clear my mind of thoughts.

However, it's not so easy to stop thinking: erasing the cards I'd seen from my mind was impossible.

I raised my head and looked at my opponent. He was smiling with even more self-satisfaction.

His smile was one of absolute self-confidence.

It's over. He's read my mind. He knows that I have no hand.

I'd been too careless. I hadn't been allowed to think. I'd had to suppress my thoughts.

He knew my cards now. Even worse, he knew that my cards were worthless.

What should I do? How can I win? How can I win in a condition like this?

Is there really a way?

Is there a way to win with no proper hand against an opponent who can read my mind—?

"————!"

Suddenly, a certain idea crossed my mind.

I got it! I know how I can win!

Kirishima responded to my train of thought with a perplexed look.

Just you watch. I'm gonna beat you now.

"Excuse me!" I shouted, ignoring Kirishima's frown. " Can I speak the owner of this casino?!"

"How can I help you, sonny?" Erika said as she appeared from somewhere and walked up to our table. Her way of talking to me suggested that she didn't know me, and her eyebrow was raised with caution.

She was going to disregard me for sure if I asked her to save me. But she could be at ease: I didn't plan on dragging her in.

"Can you lend me 100 chips?" I asked.

"Can you pay me back?"

"Here, you can take my student card," I said and handed my card case over to her. She opened it and took out my student card.

"If you can't pay me back, I'll come to your place and recover the debt. Is that fine with you?"

"Yes. May I go fetch the chips myself?" I asked.

"Of course. Please, this way."

I followed Erika to receive my chips.

"You're walking on thin ice," she whispered without looking at me. Accepting my request was probably as far as she was willing to go for me.

Making such a request had been a gamble for me, too. The plan was to leave my seat and flesh out my strategy in the meantime.

Can I really win with this strategy?

Like puzzle pieces I put together my ideas to a plan that would lead me to victory.

—Yes, I can win.

The flash of inspiration was genuine.

Using that method I could win against Kirishima even if he was reading my mind.

Armed with a sack of casino tokens, I returned to the table.

"...And here I was wondering what you're up to," Kirishima sighed. "Is this how you intend to win? By giving up the battle and buying your way out? I'm sorry,

lad, but it's too late for those chips. I'm not going to return the girl to you like this."

I slammed the sack on the table.

"Hm?"

"You agreed that you would bet Saki if I bet 100 chips, didn't you? Well, it's about time you did!"

"...Are you serious now?" he asked in disbelief because he knew my cards.

"More so than ever before! I'm also serious about winning, of course."

"What a farce, but no use talking sense into a scatterbrained fool. Very well, then. I raise. I bet this girl."

The dealer squinted at my own stake. Of course, what I said wasn't just a bluff.

"I raise by 100."

After I had raised, Kirishime picked a few cards to swap, but I stopped him.

"Wait."

"What is it?"

"I'm not done yet."

Betting 100 chips for Saki was not part of my plan to win. It was only a preparation required to get Saki back.

The first step to victory only just coming.

So far, my Vision had helped me to prevent predicted death situations. This time, it was the other way around.

"I still raise." And in order to predict my own death I continued: "I bet my own life."

Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head——

"You bet 'your life'? Give me a break..."

"If Saki's treated like property, then the same should apply to my life."

"Oh come on..." *Don't get ahead of yourself just because you've found out about my Relic!* "Surely you're willing to die right here and now when you're so bold as to claim to bet your life, right? Just to make this clear: I'm not going to go out of my way to kill you by my..."

The boy shattered the glass of mineral water an employee had brought earlier and held the edge to his throat.

"If I lose, you get to see how I kill myself like this!"

His remark threw the audience into an uproar. They told him to stop but were unable to intervene because he might cut his throat by accident.

"Don't be silly. Someone, make him stop. Surely the casino will not tolerate such foolish behavior?"

"I don't mind," the owner of the casino suddenly said. "Of course we would never tolerate this under normal conditions, but in this case you preceded him by betting a girl in place of casino tokens. It was a mistake on our part that we did not step in and stop you. As such, I will make an exception and permit this match on my responsibility."

...She's in cahoots with the boy.

Mind's Voice did not enable me to listen to the thoughts of the person I was paying attention to, not of all people around me.

Since I hadn't expected the owner of the casino to be connected with him, I hadn't bothered to read her mind.

But it's even more absurd to bet one's life if they're connected.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Why, of course not. Although truth be told, I'd rather you folded," she replied.

Oh, I see...

I finally figured out his plan, which had still been vague when he left his seat; if I folded now, he would get his girl back effortlessly.

That's what you call a plan to win?

Don't be ridiculous! Do you think I would bend to such a cheap threat?

It disgusts me to see someone so feebleminded and reckless.

"Fits me well! Let's continue! But I'll have you take responsibility, okay?" I insisted.

My victory is set in stone, anyway.

"I'm not retreating," I said. "If you think you can win like that, you are badly mistaken! I suggest that you fold if you cling to life."

"Same to you. I suggest that you fold if you're scared!"

"What?"

"I have bet my life, and you have bet Saki. That means that if I win, I'll have you pay my part as well.

"—In other words, you will pay with your life."

"!"

He was right: I was also going to lose my life if I was defeated.

No, it won't come to that. Even if it does, I'll just run away.

I'll just give him his money, his girl—even my Relic if need be—and run away.

"Besides, I don't think I can win with just this."

"What?"

—My cards are the 2 of hearts, the 4 of diamonds, the 5 of clubs, and the 7 and 9 of spates.

The boy's thoughts entered my head.

Even though his thinking had been rather silent until now—either because he had been trying not to think about his plan or because he had simply been too worked up—he seemed to be aggressively making up thoughts for me to read.

A monologue of thoughts had started.

I couldn't deny myself a grin.

This isn't just "no hand"; it's a bunch of worthless cards. How does he plan on winning against me with those?

My hand of four aces was almost *too good* to waste on him.

—Of course I don't think I can win with these cards. So I do this!

With these thoughts, he discarded all five cards.

"Do you want to swap all cards?" asked the dealer.

"Yes," the boy nodded.

The dealer dealt five new cards to him, but the boy showed no sign of picking them up.

That's how he wants to win? By not looking at his cards? And here I was thinking he had a plan...

How silly.

It was true that I couldn't predict his cards if he didn't know them himself. I couldn't predict his hand.

That being said, my own hand was a quad of aces, with the herald of death—a joker—smiling at me among them.

Since the joker was with me, he could not possibly have five of a kind.

In other words, the only hand that could beat me was a royal straight flush, and there was no way he would draw *that*.

Our last game did not even require me to read his mind.

Are you listening? You are, right?

Let me tell you something!

You're not the only one who's got a Relic. I have one, too!

Mine is called Vision. It's a Relic that lets me foresee the future.

I can't lie to myself anyway, so I'm not going to be honest with you: Vision doesn't let me see the future at will. I don't know the winning number at a lottery ahead of time, and I can't even tell the weather of tomorrow. There is only one type of future that I can predict.

Death.

When I put my life at stake, I was able to see a death.

I saw myself losing and dying. With a pair consisting of the 2 of hearts and the 2 of spates.

Catch my drift?

I just discarded the 2 of hearts. In other words, the future in which I lost with that pair disappeared.

And now I know that I have won.

"Why? It's fifty-fifty! You don't know if you've won already ."

I unwittingly raised my voice, but I didn't care.

How could he tell that he had won?

He had only erased the future where he lost with a pair of twos; the chances were fifty-fifty again. No, if he knew my hand, he would have to admit that his chances were even worse .

—You don't get it, do you?

What do I not get, boy?

—I changed the future where I lost, but I haven't seen another future afterward. In other words, I'm sure not to lose this game .

I finally noticed after he had spelled it out for me.

But do you think I'll buy that?

In order to set my victory in stone, I called and tried to draw the remaining ace—or any other card that could prevent a royal straight flush on his part—but the card I received was just the 3 of spates.

I gazed at his cards.

I want to know what they are. Just one would do. One would be enough to tell.

What's on those cards' faces...?

"I stay," he said without the slightest hesitation, with conviction even, and left his cards untouched.

Hereby the second round was over.

Risk a showdown or fold?

What's there to waver? There's no way I would lose! It's next to impossible that a dealer would deal a royal straight flush just like that. But hold on... the owner and the boy are connected. It's perfectly possible that the dealer is also connected with him.

Maybe they have made the arrangements when he left his seat earlier?

I tried reading the owner's mind, but she didn't seem to know his cards either. In fact, she appeared to be on edge even.

Did the dealer act by himself? No, he doesn't know the cards , either. He's patiently waiting for the game to settle, whatever the result.

But where does the boy's conviction come from, then? How can he remain so calm when his life's at stake?

"A-Aren't you afraid?" I asked.

"Afraid of what?"

"Your bloody life is at stake, boy!"

"Yeah, of course I'm afraid, but I'm used to this kind of situation. I know when to stand my ground."

This immature boy claims to have experience with risking his life?

However, he was not lying; his inner voice did not deny it.

The inner voice does not lie.

I could determine if someone was lying, because I would hear their inner voice deny it.

While it was possible to keep a lie to oneself, it was not possible to keep a lie hidden even *from* oneself.

Because there was no other place to hide a lie.

"I have something to lose in this game. If I can only take it back by putting my life at stake, then I'll bet it without a second thought!"

The boy gazed at the girl I stole from him and said with an iron will glowing in his eyes:

"I won't let anyone take her from me."

"...I fold," Kirishima muttered with slouched shoulders and the audience cheered.

Upon getting a broad smile from me, Saki approached me without showing anything that even resembled a smile.

"You're so reckless again."

Indeed, this was the first time I had seen myself committing suicide. I had to admit that I'd acted really reckless.

To be honest, I didn't think I had the guts to die, but apparently I did.

I sure didn't want to resort to this kind of courage ever again.

"I'm amazed that you could win with this," Saki then said after flipping all my cards.

On the table lay the only hand that was weaker than a pair of twos—a no-pair.

This is the story of me and my Relic, Mind's Voice.

The owner of that mysterious store claimed that what I wanted was Mind's Voice, but I had no special interest in reading others' minds.

She then said something along the lines of it being a hidden desire, which I interpreted as an attempt to sell the product to me, but since the price itself was not that high, I decided to buy it nevertheless.

But having obtained it, I was at a loss what to do with it.

I'm no idiot. I was perfectly aware that I could use Mind's Voice to my heart's content to read the minds and true intentions of the people I faced.

Sadly though, I consider myself a misanthrope and therefore had no interest in others whatsoever.

I've always drawn a distinct line between mer and others—and this hasn't ever changed. Therefore, there was no point for me in reading minds.

While the shopwoman had claimed that Mind's Voice was a hidden desire of mine, I was not at all convinced.

Of course, I tried using it. But nothing came out of it.

What good is it to feel out someone's true intentions?

If I provided the answer the other party sought, I became a good flatterer.

If I knew what the other party wanted, I merely became the sharp-witted guy.

Quite the contrary to what one would expect at first thought, hearing others' true intentions was a restriction that forced me to cater to them. A good thing for them, of course, but an ordeal for me.

Because all I ever did was parroting their needs and wishes.

Of course, knowing someone's desires was much to my liking as someone who always wanted to know the answer ahead of time. Still it served no purpose, since I had no notion of forming relationships.

As a result of not finding a proper way to utilize Mind's Voice, I fell back on abusing it to win at the casino.

Until they took it from me, that is.

But maybe that's for the better. I couldn't bring myself to let go of a superpower, even if I had no use for it, so the only way was if someone forced me to.

"Kirishima-san?" a woman who worked at the same company asked on the train home. "What a coincidence!"

"Yes, indeed."

"Ah, do you have some time? I would love to hear your opinion on something! It's about someone who works in the same department..."

Advice, eh?

Through obtaining Mind's Voice, I had become able to give the answers others' wanted instead of just replying randomly. While my indifferent attitude hadn't changed, the way how others perceived me did, and they started to ask me for advice.

Oh well, what do you want me to say today? I thought as I tried listening to her mind.

But I heard no voice.

Right... they took Mind's Voice from me.

"...He always gets angry at me when I make a mistake, you know? Even though he doesn't with other people. What do you think of that?"

Well, because he hates you I suppose?

No, wait! If he's in the same department, it could well be that he's trying to teach her something.

Ah, no. It's a man we're talking about. He might have some ulterior motive.

But come to think of it, aren't they dating each other?

Calling it an "ulterior motive" might offend her.

Ah, no, I think I've heard that they split up about a month ago...

...Who told me that? If I learned it by reading someone's mind, it would be unnatural for me to know.

Which is it?

No, more importantly, how am I supposed to deal with this situation?

I don't know.

I don't know.

Ah, I remember now. ***This*** *is why I came to hate humans.*

Mind's Voice has got me into uncalled-for human relations. So much to "a hidden desire of mine"... never have I wished for something like this.

"Um, so what do you think?" she urged.

What do I do?

How do I answer?

Having grown accustomed to parroting back their thoughts, I was at a loss for an answer and had to face how dependent on Mind's Voice I had become.

Suddenly, the words I was told when I received Mind's Voice crossed my mind.

She told me that Mind's Voice was what I desired. So that's why...

But it's too late for insight now.

I remember giving them random answers, but how did I come up with appropriate random answers?

Where have my own words gone...?

"Well, all's well that ends well," Towako-san grinned as she kept throwing and catching Mind's Voice.

Mind's Voice was an earring composed of little rings that were modeled on ripples. The piercing in Kirishima's ear had been a Relic.

"It was a real close shave, though..." I said.

"That should have taught you a lesson about gambling ."

"But under normal conditions Saki's poker face could make us rich."

"Haven't you learned anything?!" Towako-san sighed and whacked me over the head.

"Ouch... isn't it your fault to go to such a place to begin with?!"

"But Towako-san went there to help a friend, Erika, didn't she?" Saki objected, responding to my sarcasm.

"Hm? She's not a friend of mine, Saki-chan, just a new acquaintance I've made."

"In that case, why did you help her anyway?" Saki asked.

"Were you after the Relic?"

"Nope, I simply played some poker there, lost badly, and ran into debts. And because I was short of cash, we

agreed that I would work for her. After a while she told me about Kirishima, so I blurted out that a Relic might be involved.

"Haha, I didn't think that there was really a Relic behind the scenes, though!" Towako-san guffawed.

"You're not a weeny bit better than me..."

"Well, it's all about learning from others' mistakes," she responded without a trace of compunction. "Besides, it's not like there haven't been any perks for you in this affair , right? Just recall that you got to see Saki becoming all worked up for you."

"What are you talking about?" Saki interrupted.

"Aww, look, she's being shy! Kirishima made you angry when he said that Tokiya and you don't belong together, didn't he?"

"......That's not true."

"I thought you were mad because he made a fool of me , Saki..." I said, re-entering the conversation.

"That's not true, either. I simply became angry because he was being rude."

With these somewhat snappy words, she increased her walking speed and walked ahead of us. *Hm... maybe it's not so hard to recognize when she's angry, after all?*

Confronted with the possibility that the biggest factor in uncovering Kirishima's foul play had been hot air, a cold shiver ran down my spine.

"Well, you're not one to talk either," Towako-san whispered into my ear.

"What do you mean by that?"

"'I won't let anyone take her from me'!"

"Wha?!" I exclaimed in utter confusion and whispered back into her ear: "Why do you know of that? Ah, you used Mind's Voice, didn't you? That's mean!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, I only thought that to myself..."

"Tokiya, I got news for you: you said that line loud and clear," Towako-san said.

"Eh?"

"I'm pretty sure that Saki-chan has heard every word."

"EEH?!"

...Oh dang. Looks like I was so agitated that my inner voice got vocal.

"D-Don't read too much into it, okay? I, uh, only wanted to make clear that he's not going to get her, you know...?"

"But you said that you won't let 'anyone' take her from 'you'. You're quite the monopolizer, eh?"

"That's not what I meant, really..."

"No kidding? Then who *may* take Saki-chan from you?"

"....."

"Come on, there's no need to deny it, is there?"

The inner voice can't lie.

However, there are also things that the *real* voice can't lie about.

Finding myself struggling for words, I averted my eyes from Towako-san and looked at Saki, who was walking a few steps ahead of us, instead.

Her face looked the same as always. It also looked the same when I won the match.

I was dying to know Saki's thoughts on that embarrassing line I had said.

"Towako-san? Can you lend me Mind's Voice just for a sec?"

"No."

References

1. ↑ Pachinko is a mechanical game originating in Japan and is used as both a form of recreational arcade game and much more frequently as a gambling device.
2. ↑ 100 yen are approximately $1, so they received about $1,000 worth in casino tokens.
3. ↑ Note that the poker rules mentioned in this chapter are *not* how the game is usually played.

Chapter 3 - Pinky

There exists a myth of a red string of fate.

As the legend goes, lovers who are fated for each other are connected by an invisible red string that is tied around their little fingers. No matter how many romantic encounters and break-ups they experience, they are said to eventually end up together.

No, perhaps it's more appropriate to say that their final choice determines who they were linked with through fate.

However, I don't like the word "fate."

I want to believe that I make my choices myself, not that someone else decides in my stead.

That being said, if there really is a red string of fate ... where does mine lead to?

Have *I* already met my fated partner?

We've split up.

He meant the world to me. I don't think I can live on without him.

Goodbye Yuu-kun. Thanks for everything.

Just a few minutes ago, I found this message on my answering machine and deeply regretted turning my cell phone off.

I immediately ran around in town to search for her. That being said, we weren't in a relationship and I wasn't her ex-boyfriend.

We were only childhood friends who had known each other for 16 years because our parents happened to be friendly neighbors. That was all there was between us.

She was best described as a "girl thirsting for love."

By that I don't mean that she was cheating or two-timing her boyfriends, but that she couldn't live without being in love with someone.

Her motto seemed to be that love was life, and her name, Karen Saotome[1], reflected her personality.

She kept repeating a cycle that consisted of falling in love with a boy, dating him, and then splitting up.

After every split-up, she would weep like it was the world's end and it was up to me to console her.

However, today of all days I wasn't at home when she called and my cell phone was turned off.

Since it was the first time that this had happened, I had never before gotten such a call from her.

She wouldn't... I told myself, but anxiety impelled me to run and search nonetheless.

I knew the places where she would usually hang out: our school, a park, a café, the library. All places where she had memories with her former boyfriends.

There was no place that was important to her and her boyfriends that I didn't know of. I was pretty sure that I remembered them better than she herself, even though she was the one who told me all that when she was talking about her love affairs to me.

Karen had the habit of revisiting all the memorable places of her most recent relationship whenever she split up with

someone, after which she would eventually go to the place where they had met for the first time.

If my memory didn't fail me, she had first met her last boyfriend on the bridge that spans over the river that splits the town. She was supposed to be there.

However, the message she had left me and the bridge formed an ominous mix.

Karen, don't be stupid! If you want to be reconciled, then so be it! I'll help you!

Make it, please make it! I desperately repeated to myself while I was running toward the bridge.

Finally there, I found Karen standing in the middle of the structure, right before the handrail.

"Karen!" I shouted as I dashed across the bridge, and then I grasped her. "Karen! Don't get any stupid ideas!"

"Ah, Yuu-kun..." she muttered, calling me by my nickname, her look distant and her mind sent into silent raptures.

Right, the alarming message she had left on my cell a few hours ago had eluded her entirely.

Still lost in reverie, Karen looked at me and said with blushed cheeks, "I found a new love."

Exhausted, I slumped to the ground and thought, ...*OK, just like I know her.*

—I love you. Please go out with me.

A girl suddenly confessed her love to me when I was about to leave the school through the gate.

The girl wasn't unknown to me, though; I had met her the day before on a bridge.

That day, I had been on my way from school to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. As I was crossing a bridge, I noticed a girl looking down at the river that was flowing 10 meters below. More precisely, I didn't "notice" her but she entered my field of view.

But then … suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head.

Yes, Vision showed me how she would throw herself into the river and die.

It was sudden. It was unexpected. I was completely unprepared to foresee the death of an unfamiliar girl.

I had already seen a stranger's death in passing once before. But while I failed to save that woman back then, my reaction was fast enough this time.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her back on the bridge, hindering her from doing the leap.

She gave me a startled look.

I then tried to persuade her not to do something as stupid as to commit suicide. Surprisingly, she nodded in agreement without the need of many words.

While I was somewhat worried about the girl, I couldn't watch over her forever and therefore decided to believe her and leave.

To tell the entire truth, I kept observing her after that from afar, but she showed no sign of killing herself. After a while, a friend of hers arrived and I left for good with a load off my mind, forgetting about her entirely.

Until she suddenly confessed to me, that is…

I was at a complete loss because her confession did not simply come unexpected, but because I hadn't fathomed anything like that to happen at all.

"Whoa, Kurusu, how did you do that? She's not even from our school!" said my classmate Shinjou as he nudged me with his elbow. We happened to be walking home together that day.

"He saved my life," the girl explained and looked at me. "Excuse me… may I ask for your name?"

"Kurusu. I'm Tokiya Kurusu."

"Tokiya-kun? What a handsome name…"

"What's yours?"

"I'm Karen Saotome. Please call me Karen."

"Okay!" Shinjou replied in my stead and continued asking and answering things.

Her name was Karen Saotome. She was enrolled in a high school in the neighboring town and was one year my junior.

She wore her hair in fluffy twintails and had a childlike face with big eyes, but there was something feminine about her that was simply charming. Without

exaggerating, she was the kind of beauty that could become an idol within her class or her school even.

Apparently, she had looked up my high school based on the uniform I'd worn when we met and had been waiting for me at the gate.

"So, Karen-chan, you fell in love with Kurusu because he saved your life?"

"Yes. I'm sure that this is fate," she said, making it obvious that she was a hopeless romantic, as she combined her hands in front of her surprisingly big bosom and gazed closely in my eyes.

Her gaze was so warm and soulful that I was forced to avert my eyes. They were pulled back a moment later, however, because Shinjou made a strange remark:

"But you're out of luck, Karen-chan. He's already got a girlfriend."

"Huh?"

"EH?"

Saotome-san and I both startled up.

"Who are you talking about?" I asked in a rough tone.

"About Saki-chan of course! That girl where you work."

"We're not in a relationship yet!"

"Is that true?" Saotome-san interrupted without missing a beat when she heard my denying it. "You don't have a girlfriend, right?"

"Huh? Uh, err…"

"Thank god…" she sighed with deep relief, her eyes slightly wet. "Ah, excuse me for a moment."

Her cell phone had rung. She turned around and discussed something. "Oh…" she then gasped.

"Excuse me for showing up today without notice. Actually, I only wanted to thank you for saving me, but I just couldn't suppress my feelings… But I really do love you. I'll be waiting for your response."

With these words and a nod, she left.

Our second encounter ended as a one-sided dialogue from start to finish. I wasn't able to do a thing, to say a thing. The storm that had just passed had left me in a state of absent-mindedness.

"Oh boy, I sure don't want to be involved in this," Shinjou said with a raised eyebrow. "She's definitely going to turn up again. Not just that, she's going to hit on you until you give in."

"You think so?"

"Pretty sure of it. Let's just hope matters don't get complicated."

"Complicated?"

"If Saki-chan gets involved."

"I-I just told you that we're not together!"

"Dude… do you realize what exactly you told me?" Shinjou sighed.

"What do you mean?"

He put on a grin that looked as naughty as if he had mimicked Towako-san even though he had never met her.

"You told me that you aren't in a relationship *yet*."

"I…I never said…"

"Yes, you did," he declared without allowing any ifs and buts.

Even so, there were *really* no plans of getting together with Saki, although I might have unwittingly said otherwise.

"Well, that girl was real cute though. Maybe you should consider switching over?"

"Switch over? I would never…!"

"Look, that means that you've already chosen someone , no?"

"……"

Shinjou was a cut or two above me when it came to this sort of thing.

"Didn't I tell you not to confess yet?"

"I'm sorry, Yuu-kun… I just couldn't hold myself back," she apologized with an upward glance, her head inclined and her hands folded in front of her chest. This was Karen's special attack; no man could help but forgive her when she apologized like this. By the way, she used this attack entirely subconsciously.

I was the one who'd figured out her crush's—Kurusu-kun's—school from the description of his uniform and bag.

It had always been my job to take care that her love would bloom. This time was no different, but while I had told her to charm him while giving thanks to him, I had explicitly forbidden her to confess. Because once turned down, it would be hard to get another chance.

Not that his turning her down would hinder me from making her succeed.

"If I listen to you, he'll become my boyfriend, right?" she said.

"I'm glad to hear that you trust me."

"Of course I do. It always goes smoothly if I ask you for help."

To be precise, "always" was not true. There was one time that I failed. The first time.

We were still in middle school when it happened.

"Do you think he likes me, too?"

Although I didn't like to meddle in someone else's love affairs, I had done some research on the boy she'd fallen in love with.

Is he in love with someone else? Do you know his favorite type of girl?

I didn't know whether or not he was in love with someone already, but Karen was certainly a good match for him type-wise.

"Why don't you try?"

With indifference and the little information I had researched, I made the mistake of pushing her back.

She confessed and she got turned down. He was in love with another girl from another school. Even worse, he was already in a relationship with that girl.

Karen cried bitterly. More so than I had ever seen before and after.

I regretted making her cry.

Why hadn't I done more thorough research?

Why hadn't I noticed that he wasn't in love with Karen?

If I'd put more effort in it, she wouldn't have had to cry.

From that day on, Karen stayed home.

Neither did she answer the phone, nor did she meet me when I stopped by her place.

I was sure that she hated me.

Out of fear to lose her and sheer helplessness, I wandered around in town.

It was then that I came across a certain shop.

I don't remember how I got there or where it was. The only thing that I remember is that it was a small, old shop in a shadowy backstreet far away from the center.

After a great deal of hesitation, I then decided to enter the shop and find a present for Karen to make up for my mistake.

The shop was waited by a woman. Since I wasn't able to assess her age as a middle school student, I only remember that she was pretty and older than me.

"Welcome. How can I help you?" she asked with a calm voice, leaving me at a loss for an answer.

I knew that Karen liked accessories, but the sort of accessory that could be found in this shop—vases and wall clocks—was old-fashioned and not cute and fancy like the kind of thing she liked.

"Um, you wouldn't happen to have some girlish accessories in your assortment?"

"I'm afraid to say that we don't have any accessories here. We only carry Relics."

By Relics, I understood antiques and art objects. At least, I was fairly sure that I wouldn't make a find here.

Reading my thoughts off my face, the saleswoman added, " Note that by 'Relics' I don't mean antiques or art objects. Relic is the word we use for tools with special capabilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or for objects that have absorbed their owner's grudge or natural spiritual powers.

"You've probably heard of them before: things like a stone that brings ill luck, or a cursed voodoo doll or a triple mirror that shows how you are going to die."

"……"

One thing was certain: Karen was not going to cheer up if I gave her such an ominous thing.

Since I had no business in this shop anymore, I bowed myself off and turned around.

Before I turned around, however, the red ring she wore on her little finger caught my eye.

"This?" she asked after tracing my glance and showed it to me like a celebrity on the press conference of her wedding.

It was a very peculiar ring, made of red string that was intertwined and woven to create a complex pattern, but it did not look cheap by any means. I had known about gold and leather rings, but this sort of ring was a first to me.

"Do you want it?"

"I didn't mean to ask for it … the ring simply caught my eye. "

"I see. It's settled then."

With these words, she removed the ring from her finger and slipped it on my own little finger.

"Excuse me…?"

"Relics choose their owners themselves. If Redtwine caught your eye, this means that it tried to draw you to it. It has chosen you!"

"Redtwine?"

"Yes, that's the name of this Relic," she explained.

"It will give you the power of observing and retying the red string of fate, effectively twisting fate itself."

Power? The red string of fate?

I couldn't quite follow the woman, and yet I found myself listening to her feverishly, almost in a state of fantasizing.

"But note that fate is mutable; what you see through Redtwine is not absolute," she emphasized and ceased to speak .

However, her explanation was not over yet.

For the first time since I was here, she showed an expression other than a smile—one of compassion toward something distant.

At last, she added:

"Twisting fate, on the other hand, will create distortion, and fate will always try to resume its original shape. Keep that in mind when you use the ring."

When I left the shop, I was confronted with a remarkable sight. It was safe to say that the world had changed entirely.

There were red lines hanging in the air.

Not one or two—they occupied my field of view, extending in huge numbers from everywhere in all directions.

What's going on? I wondered. They hadn't existed a moment ago.

A moment ago? Yes, before I entered the shop.

It was then that I recalled the saleswoman's words.

It will give you the power of observing the red string of fate—

I looked at the ring on my little finger. It was composed of interwoven red strings that were much like the lines hanging in the air.

At last the penny dropped: the red lines were strings.

On closer inspection, I noticed that the strings were tied to the left little fingers of the pedestrians walking the streets.

"Those are the red strings of fate?" I muttered to myself and observed them even closer.

Before me was a man whose red string was tied to the little finger of the woman walking beside him.

Next to me was a woman whose red string extended into the distance.

Behind me was a couple whose red strings went away in opposite directions.

The red string of fate was indeed visible to me.

"Hm?"

Suddenly, I noticed a couple my age walking toward me. I didn't know the girl, but I knew the guy.

It was the guy who had turned Karen down.

As he walked past me without noticing me, I looked at his little finger. The red string connected his little finger with that of the girl walking by his side.

His blissful smile burnt itself into my mind.

Karen was in tears.

Karen was in despair.

Karen was in distress.

And yet that asshole was enjoying himself with his sweetheart.

My contempt for him was unjustified. He was not to blame for not reciprocating Karen's feelings, nor had there been any ill will on his part. And the girl next to him I didn't even know.

However, I couldn't bring myself to forgive him.

I walked behind them and grabbed their red string. I felt no surprise at being able to touch the string.

*It will give you the power of observing **and retying** the red string of fate—*

Before her words even crossed my mind, I ripped the red string connecting them apart and looked after them.

Before long they let go of each other's hand. The distance between them grew and the casual talk came to an end. Eventually they wound up in a fierce argument and parted in opposite directions.

That was no coincidence; it was the power of Redtwine. I had no problem to believe in its power.

In my hand I still held the torn red string of that guy.

"Yuu-kun! I have big news for you!"

Karen came visiting me with an angelic, beaming smile that had no traces of depression.

She waved her hand and from behind the door a boy appeared. It was the boy who had turned her down and who had his red string torn by me the day before.

"We're a couple now!" As she said this, the guy blushed. " He gave me a call yesterday and said that he changed his mind. So we decided to date each other!"

I looked at her little finger out of the corner of my eye. A red string was tied around it with a bow knot, which led to the finger of the boy next to her.

Of course that was no news to me. After all, I had tied that string to her myself.

After tearing off his red string the day before, I kept ahold of it. Length was of no import to the string of fate, it seemed—the thread grew as long as needed.

I then went to Karen's, still carrying said string, and sneaked into her room after getting her mom's approval—we'd known each other for as long as I can remember, after all—and tied the string around her little finger.

There was already a red string tied around her finger, but while I didn't know where it led to, I didn't care.

Karen needed another guy right now.

Since I didn't remove her existing red string, there were two guys linked to her through fate now. I simply didn't care, either .

What was important was that I had regained her smile instead of losing it forever.

"We're going shopping now."

"That's cool. Enjoy yourself," I replied.

"Thanks. See you!" she said and left while holding hands with the guy.

When I went back inside, feeling a combination of joy and loneliness in my stomach, I encountered my grandma who was looking at me with an expression of regret.

"What's wrong, grandma?"

"Karen-chan has found a handsome boyfriend, hasn't she?"

"Seems so."

"What a pity… I was sure you would marry her…"

"Don't be silly, grandma," I laughed.

Karen didn't see me in that light.

We were childhood friends through and through. Even more than as a friend, she saw me as family.

The evening before, I had tried comparing our little fingers. Needless to say, there was no red string connecting the two of us—our strings led far away even though she was right by my side.

Far away in opposite directions.

"I wonder what your future wife will be like, Yuu-chan…"

Without any special intention, I looked at grandma's red string. The string tied around her little finger wasn't connected to anywhere and simply fell to the ground.

Perhaps the string had come loose because grandpa passed away the year before.

I tried looking at my own little finger.

Where is mine connected to…?

They split up three months later.

The guy's red string had come loose from Karen's little finger, and instead—

The string was once again connected to the little finger of his ex-girlfriend.

Fate will always try to resume its original shape. Keep that in mind when you use the ring—

The warning the saleswoman had given me suddenly crossed my mind.

I had forgotten entirely; I thought that my role was over and that her love would prosper.

I hurried to Karen to console her.

While she was depressed, there was no comparison to how depressed she had been after getting turned down.

Karen longed for pure love. She did not permit unfaithfulness and changes of mind. Therefore, although she was sad about her expired romance, she didn't miss him.

However, we're talking about the hopeless romantic Karen Saotome: She found a new crush in no time.

Again, I connected the red string of her new love to her little finger and made her succeed. And whenever the string came loose again, I would repeat the same procedure with her next crush.

Karen was in the dark about all this of course. She didn't need to know.

All I wanted was to see her happy smile.

Next on the list was a guy called Tokiya Kurusu.

All right, let's cut his red string and connect it to Karen's pinky.

I'm a Cupid of love.

Karen's personal Cupid.

"Tokiya."

"Huh? Y-Yeah?"

"What's the matter? Your mind is somewhere else."

"N-Nothing, really."

"Okay, then pull yourself together and concentrate on your job," Saki shortly stated, pulling me back to reality, and resumed ordering our wares.

Man… Because there was nothing to do, I couldn't help but think back at that incident.

By "that incident" I was of course referring to the confession of love.

I don't mean to boast, but I hadn't ever in my life been confessed to. There was really nothing to boast about and I had no idea how to deal with this matter.

There was no way around giving her a reply sooner or later.

What should I do about it?

My eyes fell on Saki and followed her delicate back. She was the same hard-working shopgirl as always—surely she had no idea of what had happened to me.

At once, I came back to my senses.

Saki had nothing to do with this matter. She had nothing to do with it… but because Shinjou planted uncalled-for ideas in my mind, I couldn't help minding her.

How would she react if she learned about it?

I'm curious… maybe I should try telling her and ask for her view? Wait wait, she'd probably just give me a deadpan "Why would you ask me" and be done with it.

Having imagined her exact answer, I suppressed my curiosity and discarded the idea of telling her.

"Tokiya."

"Huh? W-What? I'm not hiding anything!"

"A guest."

"Guest? Aah, you mean a customer, right? H-How rare … haven't seen one in a week."

"No."

"No? Has it been ten days, or what?"

"That's not it," she explained. "*You* have a guest, Tokiya."

"Huh?" I muttered as I looked at the entry, and I tensed up.

The very girl who had confessed to me was standing there. She, Saotome-san, responded to my glance by joyfully waving her hands at me.

Although completely flabbergasted by her unexpected appearance, I rushed to her and asked, "E-Eh? Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see for myself where you work! Teehee!"

"T-Teehee …?"

"Am I a bother?" Saotome-san asked with an upward glance, quickly getting all teary-eyed.

"N-No, that's not what I mean…"

"Thank god…" she sighed with relief as her tearful face turned into a beaming smile.

What an animated girl…

"How did you find out about here, anyway?"

"I followed you! Teehee!"

…Oh boy, way to scare me with a carefree smile. Well, can't say that she's a stalker since she doesn't seem to have any bad intentions.

All of a sudden, a cold shiver ran down my spine.

I could clearly feel a stinging gaze on my back, but as though paralyzed I was unable to turn around. Saotome-san, on the other hand, paid no heed to the glance piercing through me and entered the shop.

"Wow, such a comfortable shop! And I love accessories ! Maybe I should buy something?"

Judging by the character toys attached to her bag, she may have really had a thing for accessories, but I doubted that she would find anything suitable in this shop. Regardless, she started looking through the shelves .

In the meantime, Saki walked up to me and whispered into my ear:

"Who is this girl?"

"S-Someone from school!"

"Oh, she is? Her uniform is different from yours, though."

"!"

Crap! I forgot that Saki knows how our school's uniforms for girls look like.

"Ah, err, from a school nearby I mean!" I corrected myself in a hurry.

I wasn't lying to her, but because I had corrected myself once, I must have sounded real fishy. I felt like I was making excuses.

"The white base looks horrible. And there's no black at all."

As Saki had noted, Saotome-san's school uniform consisted of a white blazer and a skirt that was checked red and white. That said, I didn't find her uniform to look "horrible". Saki only had a problem with it because of her extreme preference for black.

It was then that Saotome-san finished browsing and walked toward us. She completely ignored me, however, and stood in front of Saki.

Why does she go to her…? I thought to myself, missing the moment to stop them. Unable to keep watching, I averted my eyes.

"Welcome," Saki said with a monotone voice like she always did.

I gathered that she wasn't satisfied by my half-assed explanation, but that didn't influence her attitude. She treated Saotome-san like a normal customer, without asking who she was, without showing any special interest in her. A customer is a customer. Saki was totally behaving professionally.

However, the current circumstances rendered her incredible deadpan scary…

Even though any other customer would find himself thunderstruck for a full 5 seconds in front of Saki, Saotome-san was left utterly unimpressed and started interrogating her.

"Do you work here?"

"Yes."

"Part-time?"

"Yes."

"Like Tokiya-kun?"

"…Yes."

After hearing this, Saotome-san turned around to me and asked:

"Tokiya-kun, are there any open positions in this shop …?"

"W-Why do you ask?"

"I would love to work here, too…!"

P-Please stop… I beg for mercy.

"Tokiya, did we have any open positions? Hm?" Saki asked.

Y-You're asking the wrong person. Go ask Towako-san.

"Hm…? 'Tokiya'? You're calling him straight by his first name?"

"Yes, I do."

"May I ask how you are related to Tokiya-kun?"

What a thing to ask… But why does she ask Saki and not me ?

"We are…" Saki paused, wavering.

She glanced at me. Sensing her glance, I turned my averted eyes on her and made eye contact. Saki immediately looked away and answered:

"…We are co-workers."

Well, yeah. She's right. That's true.

"I see. Good," Saotome-san replied with a smile.

"What do you call 'good'?" Saki asked this time around .

"I mean that's good to hear. Because I lo—"

"Hold it!" I interrupted.

What was she about to say there? No, that's pretty obvious. I can't let her say that in front of Saki… no, it doesn't matter in front of whom she blurts out something like that.

In order to prevent Saotome-san from giving Saki weird ideas, I took her hand and pulled her out of the shop.

"…Um, did I trouble you, perhaps?" she then said with a face gloomy with regret. She had doubtlessly troubled me, but I couldn't possibly complain to her when she showed so much remorse. She certainly didn't mean any harm.

"Um, no, don't mind it."

"Thank god…" she said with a smile of relief.

To be entirely honest, her smile was incredibly cute. Not only that, she was also cute in general.

Therefore I felt that I had to ask the question I was burning to ask.

"Tell me one thing. Why me? Because I saved your life ? I assure you, anyone else would have done the same!"

"No, that's not it," she distinctly denied. "It was the first spark, yes, but that's it. I don't fall in love with someone just because he saved me. I… sensed that we are fated for each other."

"Fated?"

"Yes. You may not believe me, but I can tell."

Female intuition or something? Well, the perks of being a girl, I guess? I thought, but my expectations were completely betrayed when she responded in a way more down-to-earth manner.

"This ring lets me know."

"Huh?"

"A childhood friend of mine once gave me this ring when I was depressed after getting turned down by someone. Ever since then I can tell who I'm fated for."

I gazed closely at the ring adorning her little finger.

"Can you really tell apart fate with this?"

"Yes."

Needless to say, the word "Relic" came to mind. I wouldn't be surprised if there was one that let you find your fated partner.

It was impossible for me not to relate things with mysterious powers to Relics.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Ah, no, I'm fine… can I take a look?" I requested, although this was not something that could be analyzed just by the eye.

"Sure!"

However, contrary to her consent, she hid her hands behind her back.

"Hm?"

"*If* you go on a date with me tomorrow," Saotome-san explained with a mischievous smile.

That was uncalled for, Karen…

You tailed me while I was tailing Kurusu-kun, didn't you? Even though I told you to go home.

And here I had been waiting for him to get alone to cut his red string of fate. She had upset all my plans.

Well, I could have just as well simply entered the shop and secretly severed his red string, but I wanted to avoid doing so in front of Karen, even though she couldn't see those strings.

If I had no luck anyway, I should've just gotten it over with while he was on his way here.

The problem was that his red string had pointed away from me while I was tailing him. Of course I could have just sneaked myself ahead of him, but then I would have risked getting the wrong red string among the countless hanging in the air.

I wanted to avoid cutting the red string of unrelated people, let alone tying the wrong one to Karen.

"Well, there's still plenty of time."

I then tried sneaking a peek into the shop to observe what was going on inside when suddenly Kurusu-kun came out through the door together with Karen. I quickly hid myself behind a corner.

Neither of them had noticed me. In fact, Karen was smiling from ear to ear because she was happy being pulled along by him.

…Love sure is blind. I'm sure she wouldn't dream of being a bother by visiting him here.

Having known her for a long time, I could tell that she was not behaving like that on purpose. She came here because she simply wanted to see Kurusu-kun—that was all that was going on in her head. That being said, I feared that he might be put off by her attitude because he didn't know that.

I should hurry up and retie his red string before Karen does something stupid. Not that it would make a difference once I've connected them.

While there were hardly any people around in this side street , they still seemed to care after all and went to the back side of the shop.

I was about to move to a spot where I could observe them, when suddenly someone else appeared through the shop entry.

It was the girl who worked there. After looking around for a moment, she carefully poked her head into the alley that led to the back of the shop.

Apparently, she was also curious about them even though she had not shown the slightest stirring of emotion when Karen made an appearance. That being said, I couldn't tell for sure because I'd been observing them from outside.

Come to think of it, didn't Kurusu-kun's buddy mention something about a possible girlfriend? Maybe she's that girl?

With these thoughts, I decided to take a look at the red string around that girl's little finger.

Sorry, but I'll take the liberty of cutting your string if it's connected to Kurusu-kun!

Before I could check, however, I sensed someone behind me .

I swung my head around and found myself looking at a woman watching me from behind.

It was close to a miracle that I didn't let out a scream. It seemed like overwhelming surprise tended to seal the voice.

"What are you doing here before my shop?" asked the woman who I deemed to be in her late twenties. She was not

trying to be intimidating toward me, but because I knew that I was doing something bad, I felt rather unsettled.

"…Wait. Did you just say your shop? Are you related to that shop?"

"You bet. I'm Towako Settsu, the owner of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. Who are you? A friend of Tokiya's?"

"Ah, um…" I uttered, unsure as to how I should reply.

If I pretend to be Tokiya's friend, it will be a hassle if she calls him. We haven't met each other yet. Should I be honest and tell her about Karen…? If possible I don't want Karen to know that I'm here, but if I tell her that I was making sure what kind of person he is, everything should go smoothly.

"No, rather than with him, I'm close friends with a girl who fell in love with Kurusu-kun."

"In love with Tokiya…?"

"Er, yes. I was just wondering what kind of place he works at."

The woman who had introduced herself as Towako Settsu nodded with an "Uh-huh", and added with an ironic smile:

"All the while looking for a chance to tie them together with Redtwine, eh?"

"____!"

This time I was literally left speechless.

"So you do know how to use it. It's unsettling to know that she would sell such a thing to a kid…" she muttered to herself and looked down at me, while I was still struggling to regain my composure.

"Surprised that I know of Relics?" she asked. "Perk up your ears then, because we carry fakes of those Relics at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. Although I'm really collecting the originals only… Hey, you wouldn't be so kind as to give away yours?"

I reflexively hid my hand behind my back.

"That's a no, eh?" she remarked with a shrug and didn't seem to apply any pressure on me.

"D-Does Kurusu-kun also know of Relics…?"

"Obviously," she briefly said.

However, that was a huge miscalculation on my part: If he knew about Relics, chances were that he would see through my suspicious behavior if I were to execute my plans.

I don't even want to think about what would've happened if I really just walked in and cut his red string…

There is a need to revise my plan. But first I have to get out of this situation here.

Settsu-san was aware of my intent to severe Kurusu-kun's red string and connect him with Karen. If I failed to deceive her, she was going to tell him and put him on the alert.

"Well, do as you please."

"Huh…?" I uttered in surprise like an idiot.

Rather than stopping me or warning him, she intended to leave me at large. On top of that she told me to go ahead with my plan.

"W-What are you up to?"

"Hm?"

"I don't see why you would just let me be. What are you planning to do…?"

"Well, I can't just go ahead and mug you, can I? Or have you changed your mind? Wanna give me your Relic?"

"No, I…"

"See? But that's okay. Just drop by when you feel like it's too much for you to manage," she suggested as though she was dead sure that was going happen.

However, I couldn't understand why she didn't insist on obtaining my Relic right now.

"Aren't you supposed to stop me if you know what I'm up to ? Or is there a catch somewhere?"

"You don't have to fear anything of the sort. There's just no reason to mind your Redtwine, since its effects are only temporary. Weren't you warned that fate would resume its former shape when altered? You're not gonna change fate with a Relic as petty as Redtwine."

"Yes, I was told that, but…"

"Besides," she said with another ironic grin, "I wish that something as feeble as your Relic would suffice to change his fate."

I was unable to grasp the true meaning of those words.

"How did it come to this?" I asked myself while I was waiting by the clock tower at the station for my date.

It was Sunday. Unlike normally, when I would have been heading to the shop at this time, I had taken the day off under the pretext of "some business at school". Towako-san approved my free day without asking any questions.

I hadn't told Saki anything.

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to talk about it with her.

Is that how it feels to cheat on someone…? I wondered. *Wait, I'm not cheating on anyone, am I? I'm just meeting up with Saotome-san in order to verify whether or not she has a Relic. Plain and simple.*

Besides, I can't be cheating on Saki if we're not in that kind of relationship. I can meet with whoever I want.

…Who am I making excuses to, anyway?

I got fed up and stopped thinking.

That being said, it was true that I wanted to verify the authenticity of her supposed Relic, and that I had to save her before she messed up her life if she could really see who her fated partner was.

I could not just turn a blind eye to someone who was about to become unhappy because of a Relic.

Besides, if she did have that power… I also wanted to check if her destined partner was really me.

"What are you doing?"

"Woah!" I exclaimed when someone suddenly talked to me from below.

Saotome-san stood before me, looking at me with an upward glance.

"Y-You're here already?"

"Yes, I just arrived. What have you been muttering?" she asked in response.

"Did I mutter something?"

"Yes!"

"Ah, never mind then. I was just talking to myself."

"You're doing that, too, Tokiya-kun? I also often talk to myself! And get laughed at by Yuu-kun…" she sighed.

"Yuu-kun?"

"An old friend. I'm always relying on him."

"I see."

"Ah, but Yuu-kun's just a friend, honestly! Don't get the wrong idea."

"Ah, yeah. Got it," I said although I didn't care enough to get any idea from it. "Um, shall we go then? Do you want to go somewhere specific?"

"Wherever you'd like to go, Tokiya-kun."

"Wherever I like?"

I was somewhat at a loss to be honest. She was the one who wanted to go on a date, not I, so I didn't have any plans for the day. That said, I didn't want to look like a wimp, either.

"Have you had lunch?"

"Mhm, not yet."

"Shall we go grab something for starters?"

"Yes, please."

For the time being, we decided to go to some fast food restaurant.

…She talks a lot.

That was the impression she left on me while we were eating.

She talked about her preferences and her hobbies, asked me things, and also told me about her school and the shows she had watched on TV the other day.

The absence of any awkward silences could be entirely attributed to her. I didn't have to search for topics because she would come up with them herself and talk away. No silence lasted longer than 3 seconds.

Whenever she was telling me something fun, she would flash a smile, and whenever she was complaining about something, she would pull a wry face. She touched on a sad scene she had seen on TV and became all teary-eyed because she remembered the scene, just to change the subject with a radiant smile a moment later.

She's nothing like her, I smiled to myself, thinking about Saki who was always expressionless and minimal when it came to talking.

"Did you like this story so much, Tokiya-kun?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked perplexed.

"Because you were laughing."

"A-Ah, yeah, that was a real fun story," I lied, unable to admit that I had laughed because of something else instead of listening to her. "Okay, what next? Do you want to do go shopping a bit?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful."

During our lunch I had learned that she loved to go shopping. She often went to general stores to look out for cute accessories, and there was one in the station building that she liked particularly.

We left the fast food restaurant and went to the station building.

The general store was packed with people and sold fancy stuff like cell phone straps, colorful scrunchies and other accessories. Their product lineup was quite stunning; they even offered character-branded stationery.

It was nothing like a certain other shop.

I wonder how things are at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop… Well, it's not like we get any more customers on Sundays. She should be fine.

"Tokiya-kun?"

"Hm? Yeah?"

"How do you like this?" she asked as she put on a pink hair clip.

Since I was not used to praising someone, I responded with a simple "Looks good."

"And this?"

This time she showed me a ribbon with light blue and white stripes. Again, she asked me if it suited her while holding it to her hair, so I said yes.

Laughing happily, she started browsing the shelves for more accessories. Most of her picks were either brightly colored or based on characters.

Heh, Saki would never choose something like that.

A smile escaped my lips as I imagined Saki wearing a pink hair clip. While it didn't look bad on her, wearing it wasn't anything like her.

Speaking of which, didn't I once give her clothes and stuff that would go well with that sort of accessory because of a Relic that affected my wallet? As fake presents.

Boy was she angry with me back then, although I managed to cheer her up with a real present.

I do think that those clothes suited her quite well, though. Not that I ever told her.

With these thoughts crossing my mind, I tried picking up a pendant that caught my eye.

The pendant was shaped like an old rune. I couldn't help feeling that Saki would like this.

"You like this sort of thing?" asked Saotome-san as she peeked at the pendant I was holding.

"No, just picked it up for no reason. I suppose this isn't your thing?"

"Yes, not really… I prefer cuter things."

"Fair enough."

Apparently, her preferences were nothing like Saotome-san's, either.

"But if you think it would suit me, I'd be more than willing to try putting it on, Tokiya-kun."

"Ah, I didn't mean to make you wear it. Pink suits you much better, I think."

I returned the pendant to its original place.

"Let's move on," Saotome-san suddenly suggested, and pulled me along into the book store next door.

"Are you looking for a book?" I asked.

"Um, yes, a magazine."

Sounds to me like she just wanted to get out of the other store to be honest … maybe she spotted someone she knows?

Saotome-san skimmed through a few fashion magazines and showed me some pages.

"I absolutely love this brand here."

"Cool."

Honestly speaking, I had no clue about fashion, and I found myself wondering if Saki also paid attention to the brand and didn't only make sure her clothes were black.

It was then that I noticed a special promotion on the neighboring shelf with a mountain of books on personal development.

"Collection of How-tos and Made-Easys," the section was labeled. This was the sort of book that Saki would often buy.

A smile escaped my lips when I discovered one that I had seen her read.

"Do you often read self-improvement books?"

"Not really. I only read manga and magazines."

"I see…"

"Ah, sorry. You don't care for such books, right?" I apologized as I put the book back into its shelf.

There's no way any normal high school student would be into this genre. Except for Saki, of course. I should tell her of this promotion when I'm back.

…I just hope she's not going to put any more effort into the wrong things.

"I didn't find anything, so let's move on!"

"Okay."

After memorizing that the special promotion lasted until the following week, Saotome-san and I left the book store.

In the end, I didn't get an opportunity to connect Kurusu-kun's red string to Karen.

I tried following him around after he had finished work, but in order not to let him notice Redtwine, I became overly cautious.

However, in the evening Karen told me that she would go on a date with him.

Having heard that, I regretted failing to cut his string. I could absolutely not allow him to sadden Karen by turning her down on their first date together.

Therefore, I decided to connect them with his red string during their date.

Tailing a childhood friend and the target of her unrequited love on a date—what a great way to spend a Sunday.

I had been waiting for them at their meeting point ahead of time and therefore watched as Kurusu-kun arrived there.

This was a golden opportunity.

If I managed to get ahold of one end of his red string before Karen's arrival, I could easily tie it to her little finger once she came. Doing so would spare me the hassle of following them around all day.

I positioned myself behind Kurusu-kun who was standing alone by the clock tower.

Everything's fine. He hasn't noticed me.

Since the clock tower was perfectly suited as a meeting point, there were countless people assembling there on this Sunday morning. While it was true that their red strings blocked my view, they were a perfect guise to sneak up to him.

I focused my eyes and tried to make out the red string coming from his little finger.

I didn't care about cutting the wrong string, but I did care about tying the wrong to Karen. Connecting some strange guy to her was out of the question. I had to get Kurusu-kun's string no matter what.

After making sure that Karen was still not here, I raised my leg to sneak up to him—and noticed that I wasn't the only one who was observing him from behind.

"That's…"

It was the girl who worked at the same shop as him if my memory was right.

Has he told her to keep watch?

This is bad. They mustn't find me.

I hurried away from the meeting point.

After Karen had joined him, they grabbed something to eat and proceeded to look around in the shopping center inside the station building.

I had been following them around, but there was always this girl that stood in my way and seemed to be playing his bodyguard. As a result, I ended up following her instead of the two of them. I prayed not to be mistaken for a stalker.

Anyhow, she didn't lose track of them for a single moment.

I realized that I wouldn't be able to connect Karen and Kurusu-kun at this rate. The girl wasn't included in in my calculations.

If I don't do something, he might turn her down!

…Karen's tear-stained face crossed my mind.

I had to prevent that no matter what. I had sworn that I would never again let anyone make her cry like that.

I know, I'll just pull the girl over to my side by connecting our red strings. That should be the most straight-forward method since I can't allow myself to cause a commotion.

I slipped Redtwine on my little finger and the moment I did so, my field of view was flooded by countless red strings.

Next, I tried to determine which of those string was coming from the girl's finger.

"!"

But all of a sudden, the girl turned around to me.

Crap! She noticed me! I was too careless. This is bad. I'm done for if she raises her voice.

I reflexively grabbed her hand and pulled her into a corner behind a product shelf.

"Be quiet. Don't notify them of me."

"…Who are you?" she asked expressionlessly and as cool as a cucumber even though she had just been forcibly dragged behind a shelf. I almost ended up being the one who was panicking.

But I have to keep an level head.

If she's so good at making predictions that she was prepared for this to happen, then so be it!

"Don't play dumb. The owner of your shop told you about me, didn't she?"

"What are you talking about?"

"…Aren't you the other clerk from that antique shop?" I asked, slightly flustered.

"Do you mean the Tsukumodo Antique Shop? If so, then yes . I work there, but who are you?"

"Do you really not know who I am?"

"Have we met somewhere…? If you are one of our customers, please forgive me. How careless of me to forget a customer's face..." she muttered, completely losing me.

"No, you're on the wrong track…"

"…In that case, who are you?" she asked again.

Did the shop owner seriously not tell her? Sure, she told me to go ahead, but did she really keep me a secret…?

If so, I'm shooting myself in the foot here. Catching her was pointless.

Crap… I'm in the shit if she calls me a creep in public.

"Who are you?"

"Err, urm, I'm a close friend of the girl who's with Kurusu-kun."

Since I didn't know how to answer her, I wound up telling her the truth.

"A friend of hers? What brings you here then?" the girl asked.

"I-I'll return that question to you: Why do you keep getting in my way?"

"In your way? What are you talking about?"

"I mean, you seem to be eager to position yourself between them and me..." I explained.

"Were you watching?"

"N-No, um, it just caught my eye."

"It's pure coincidence."

"It's coincidence that you tailed them?" I asked back.

"I-I just happened to come across Tokiya who happened to be skipping work today, so I was wondering what he might be doing."

"…Are you worried about him, by any chance?"

She gasped, and after a short, awkward pause she brought her face closer to me and said:

"No, I'm not."

We lost them.

"Did you find them?" I asked Maino-san.

"They weren't over here, either."

We had lost track of Karen and Kurusu-kun while we were talking with each other. Since Maino-san and I shared a goal, we both tried looking for them in different places separately, but neither of us was successful.

The mall had 5 floors, and the number of shops was more than I was willing to count. Obviously, I couldn't just call her, either. If they had gone to another floor, finding them was next to impossible.

As for Maino-san, I couldn't quite read off her face if she was disinterested or antsy.

*Well, I guess she **is** worried, considering that he was tailing them. But still…*

"I suggest you don't dress up like this."

"What do you mean?" she asked back.

"No, seriously, you stand out badly."

All would have been well if being dressed all in black was the only feature of her getup, but she also wore a broad-brimmed, laced hat on her head—probably to conceal her face—and topped it off with a pair of sunglasses. She had completely overdone her disguise and was attracting attention from all sides.

In fact, I originally thought she was trying to intimidate me with that stuff because she hadn't been wearing them when I tried to sneak up to Kurusu-kun at their meeting point.

"Do I stand out?" she asked perplexedly while inclining her head. "But I followed the advice in this book."

She produced a small paperback from her pocket and opened it to the bookmark. The book was titled "How to Become a Master Detective" and the title of the chapter she was checking read "The Case-Book of the Downtown Lady-Detective: Love Wreathed in Steam".

Sounds like a cheap thriller anthology to me… More importantly, is she being serious? Or is she that flustered?

"But you *were* tailing them if you're carrying around a detective manual, weren't you?"

She gasped again, and after another short and awkward pause, she said with a poker face:

"…No, I wasn't."

Hrm… I just can't read her. Am I overthinking things…?

"But you're worried about him, right?"

"And you're worried about her, aren't you?" she replied, most likely not ironically.

Apparently, I looked nervous to her, and she wasn't really mistaken: I wanted to retie his red string already.

"Well, yeah, I am. We must quickly find them."

"Why?" Maino-san asked.

"She's a bit clumsy, you know. She needs someone to watch over her."

"Watch over her and then do what?"

Telling her the truth was out of the question; if she didn't know of Redtwine, there was no need to go out of my way to explain it to her.

"No, I really only want to watch over her. Well, and help her out if something goes wrong."

"How?"

"For example by giving her a hand with something without her noticing, I guess?"

"So that it works out well for them?"

"Yeah, so that it works out well for them."

And so that Karen will be happy.

"Do you disagree?"

"I…" she muttered and groped for an answer to my mean question.

"Looks like you're the opposite of me," I then stated.

"No… I don't mean to…"

She tried to explain herself but ended up beating around the bush because she couldn't bring herself to deny it.

She really was the opposite of me. I felt sorry for her a bit—because I was going to set Kurusu-kun up with Karen.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"I just told you, didn't I?"

"Is that all there is?"

"That's all there is."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You watch over her and then…?" she asked again.

"As I said, that's all. I only want Karen to be happy."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Sorry, but I'm not going to give you the answer you were expecting, I added in my thoughts. *Right, this isn't about love and romance. My feelings are closer to those of a close friend or family.*

The only difference is that my feelings are a weeny bit stronger than those of normal friends and family, and that I can actually effect something.

I wouldn't have been able to do so much without the help of Redtwine.

But I did have its power. I did have the power to make her happy.

Therefore, it was my duty to take full advantage of it—even more so because doing so matched with my own wishes.

"We've been together for as long as I can remember. Our parents were on super good terms with each other, so we ended up always acting together. The longer I was with her when I was little, the more those feelings of love faded away."

"So you did actually love her."

"…When I was in kindergarten! I even proposed to her."

"How did it go?"

"I think we went as far as holding a wedding ceremony?" I told her, digging up an old, paled memory.

It was a nostalgic memory that had slipped my mind entirely .

Why do I recall this now? I asked myself.

Not that I want to disagree with myself, but there was no doubt that I had loved Karen back then, and she had loved me back.

But then we grew up and she learned what love really was, realizing that the romance in our memories only existed in play . No, most likely she didn't even remember having had such

artificial feelings of love for me in the first place. They weren't real. Even if they were, her feelings weren't serious enough to not fade into obscurity.

But there had been love between us at some point.

When did those feelings go away…?

…Hold on, what am I pondering over here?

There was no romantic love between Karen and me. Sure, I held her dear and loved her more than anyone, but not in a romantic sense. My feelings for her were limited to wishing that she was happy.</i>

But why do I wish for that, anyway?

Because I don't want to see her cry?

Yes. That's all.

Friendly love and atonement for what I've done to her.

That's all.

There's nothing more than that.

I mustn't think of more.

I mustn't think too deeply about it.

"I'm going home," Maino-san suddenly said and walked away.

"Are you sure? Maybe they'll start dating at this rate?"

Why am I trying to stop her when she's clearly standing in my way? What if she changes her mind?

However, Maino-san silently shook her head.

"I can't allow myself to follow them without making up my mind like you."

In other words…

"You really love him, don't you?"

She silently shook her head again. Not to evade the question , but not out of denial either.

"I don't know," she explained.

"You don't know…?"

"Yes. Tokiya is without doubt special to me, but I can't tell the nature of my feelings for him," she whispered as if to verify her feelings and continued:

"He is suffering a lot because of me although he doesn't know, but if I lost him, nothing would remain of me; perhaps, I would not even be able to live on. Therefore, my feelings might just be feelings of guilt or fear. I don't know what's at the core of his significance to me.

"—Sorry, I must be confusing you."

There seemed to be something only she knew.

"You are a kind person," she whispered with a lonely glance directed to the ground. "I wish I was like you… I wish I could content myself with his happiness alone."

Leaving behind those words, Maino-san left.

There was one thing I wanted to tell her once the day arrived when Karen and Kurusu-kun parted on amicable terms.

If you can't content yourself with just his happiness and instead wish for your happiness together—

—then you already know the answer to your feelings.

We kept strolling around in the mall for a while and eventually returned to the clock tower where we had met .

It was 07:00pm—time for dinner.

Should we call it a day? Or should I ask her out for dinner? Or go to the park?

At any rate, I still had to have her show me her ring and verify whether or not it was a genuine Relic.

I thought she'd bring up this matter, though…

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she replied.

"About the matter you told me; that ring that lets you determine…"

"Can I ask you something before that?" she interrupted me with a question of her own.

"Sure. What is it?"

"I would like to hear your response to my confession."

"Ah…"

Right. I forgot.

"I thought you would bring up this matter, though..." she said.

She had kept her word of 'waiting for my response.' I was certainly supposed to answer her before questioning her about her Relic.

"Once again: I love you, Tokiya-kun. Please go out with me."

"I'm sorry," I refused with honesty.

Saotome-san was a very lovely girl by all means, but I had no romantic feelings for her. There was no hesitation or regret.

"I thought so," she laughed. She didn't cry. "That's weird, I was sure we were meant for each other… It's always the same. It never works out when I think I found my fated one."

Even someone as slow-witted as me understood what she was getting at; she was telling me in a roundabout way that she couldn't determine her fated partner.

She had no Relic.

The ring on her little finger was just a normal ring.

Still, I didn't think of her as a liar. Certainly, she had been dead sure that we were meant for each other—which honored me, of course. I didn't even think of complaining to her.

But I didn't know what to say to her, either.

"Well, bye then."

"Yes," she nodded and walked away.

After a few steps, however, she stopped and turned around to me once more.

"Just a piece of advice," she started, smiling. "You shouldn't think about another girl when you're with a girl."

I was floored.

Not because she had noticed, but because I hadn't noticed myself until she pointed out to me—

—that I had been thinking about Saki all the time.

"I got rejected," Karen said with a tear-stained smile after she visited me late in the evening.

In the end, I didn't find back to them and couldn't tie Kurusu-kun's red string to her. *I should have just butted in and get it over with*, I through with regret.

"I was always proud that I managed to become a couple with everyone who I thought was meant for me, but looks like the chain was broken…"

"I'm sorry."

"Mhm, it's not your fault, Yuu-kun. I should have listened to you like always. It's just that I thought that I had to make an effort myself for once so that you wouldn't have to go all the way to his school just for me. I was so silly to believe I could do anything on my own…"

I knew what she was referring to.

Be it the confession, the locating of his workplace, or their date—this time, she acted of her own accord instead of depending on me.

Even though there was no need for her to be considerate to me. I wanted to be the one person she could consult without reservation.

I let her into the house and had her wait in my room while I was making her a nice and warm hot chocolate. When I came back, she was crying as expected.

This is the second time that I made her cry because I messed up... even though I was helping her love affairs along to prevent just that.

Why do I keep repeating the same mistake?

I got distracted by Maino-san and forgot about Karen. Even though it's evident who is most important to me.

"Karen."

Unable to hug her, I sat down next to Karen, who was sitting on my bed and weeping, and wordlessly held the hot chocolate.

Noticing the sweet aroma that was rising from the cup, she raised her face and accepted the hot chocolate from me. She blew into it a few times and took a single sip.

"Delicious," she said with a teary but innocent smile.

<i>Why do things that her this girl exist in the world? I wondered.

No matter how dear she was to me, no matter how much I protected her, the world and other people just wouldn't stop hurting her.

Suddenly, I started wondering where the red string around her finger, which I could never untie or cut, led to.

I want to find him for her. I want to find the person on the other end of her red string of fate.

"Karen, want to go searching?"

"Hm?"

"Let's go find the one who's meant for you! You always said you could tell, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did… but that's a lie. I can't tell who's meant for me . If I could…"

"I'll help you! Together I'm sure we'll find him."

In fact, I had traced her red string several times already. Whenever she cried—whenever her love ended—I would go search for the one who would not break her heart anymore.

However, I would always lose track of her red string eventually. But I was sure that we could pull it off if Karen followed me.

"You're so kind, Yuu-kun. You always look for me."

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Because…" *We're friends*, I almost said as I was used to saying, but I had to swallow these words.

Karen was silently looking up at me.

Never before had she gazed at me with such eyes. Her eyes asked for a different answer than usual.

My heart pounded.

We can't, I immediately thought.

Karen was asking for something that had been there all the time but that I had come to ignore.

The magic seal will break if it's put into words.

You're about to open the box I've sealed away for no one to see, not even myself.

But Karen was waiting. She was waiting for me.

Is it really okay, Karen?

You mustn't ask this question, you know?

There will be no going back, you know?

I was content with just being by her side and protecting her.

If we dug deeper in search for something, we were without doubt going to seek for more.

Are you really okay with that?

"Why?" she asked again as if to give me the last push.

Therefore, I stepped forward and said it.

"…Because I love you more than anyone."

The seal was broken.

The noble prince who protected her no matter what had turned into a beast that thirsted for her.

However—

She snuggled up to the beast and leaned herself against it.

"You finally said the words. I was waiting for them so long. "

She softly placed her hand on mine.

The day when I had made Karen cry for the first time—when I obtained Redtwine—I'd bought her a ring and placed it next to her pillow.

Usually she wore that ring on her little finger, but today I found it slipped on her ring finger.

The words of the saleswoman came to mind.

But note that fate is mutable—

Suddenly, I realized something.

The red string coming from her little finger was connected with mine.

Long ago I have sealed them away.

For a long while, I have averted my eyes from them, hiding them behind a wall of lies.

Yet they kept surfacing, and whenever they did, I gave up once more, forgot them and deceived myself again.

I've repeated this loop so many times that I forgot where those feelings of mine had gone.

But—

Thank god I didn't discard away.

Thank god I didn't destroy them.

Thank god I didn't kill them.

Right now I know for sure.

Right now I can tell for sure.

More so than in the past.

More so than yesterday.

That I love you more than anyone.

"Can we forget about what happened yesterday?"

The date had changed.

The one hearing those words was me.

The one saying those words was Karen.

After going home in the morning, Karen returned to my place and confronted me with those completely unexpected words.

"…Huh?"

Her words pierced right through me and disappeared beyond the horizon before I could even grasp them.

Unlike me, who was still thunderstruck, Karen was smiling like always, like an angel or a girl in love.

Who is that smile directed at? Not at me?

From behind the door appeared—

"He asked me to start all over again."

It was the guy who had almost driven her into suicide by splitting up.

This morning he called me you know and he apologized to me and begged me to start over again but I told him about you and me Yuu-kun but he said he still loves me and that I'm everything to him and that got me thinking and realized that you're more of a friend than a lover to me Yuu-kun but don't get me wrong I love you but just not as a lover you see I'm really sorry but let's stay friends okay?

Karen said something, but while her words entered my ears, they didn't reach my heart. No, they *did* reach my heart.

The problem was with my heart; it was already broken.

Therefore, I felt nothing when I noticed that her ring had moved back from her left ring finger to her right little finger.

"Yuu-kun…?"

"…Yeah, I got it."

"Really?!" she said with a happy smile.

Delighted that she could split up with me.

"Yeah, really."

I had known from the start that Karen was nothing more than a childhood friend.

I had said myself that there was no love or romance between us.

Things simply fell into place.

"I'll see you then," she said and turned around to her boyfriend.

"Karen."

"Hmm?"

I raised my hand and held out my little finger to her.

"Let's friends forever. Pinky promise."

Hearing me say that we were not lovers, she put on a beaming, carefree smile and entwined her little finger with mine.

"I love you, Yuu-kun."

"I love you too, Karen."

We promised to stay close friends and parted.

A single red thread was left behind at my feet.

It was Karen's red string of fate.

It was the red string of fate that had been tied to my little finger the day before.

It was the red string of fate that had not been tied to my littler finger anymore that day.

I had known from the start that Karen was nothing more than a childhood friend.

I had said myself that there was no love or romance between us.

Things simply fell into place.

However.

The truth was that I had indeed been in love with her.

I should have kept the lid to my feelings closed.

I should have kept my eyes averted.

I would have been okay if those feelings had stayed forgotten.

But I had become aware of them.

I had experienced the delight of winning her heart.

I had experienced the toughness of losing it again—and couldn't take it.

I carefully picked up Karen's red string of fate and tied it around my little finger, as if to reminisce about the night before .

However—

Karen and I were not going to become a couple again.

The fateful string I had picked up did not lead anywhere, not even to Karen.

The moment when we entwined our fingers to make a pinky promise, I had torn off her red string.

Karen did not have a red string of fate anymore.

I'll keep my promise!

I won't be more than friends with you.

I won't become your lover.

I won't ask you to answer my love.

And…

I won't forgive you.

Karen.

Karen, you who lost me.

Karen, you who lost love.

Karen, you who cannot live without love.

I will watch over you as a friend for the rest of my life.

Therefore, I pray—

May you become the unhappiest person under the sun.

Right after I had parted with Saotome-san, I stopped by a certain place before going home. Well, there was only one "certain place" that would come into question.

The Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

I entered the shop and was greeted by the familiar clang-clang of our bell.

"Welcome back," Saki said as though she had been waiting for my return all along.

"Thanks," I replied in an equally natural manner and sat down on a chair.

Since I had nothing else to do, I watched Saki work. Well, there weren't any customers around, so she didn't actually do anything.

"What's the matter?" Saki asked when she noticed my gaze on her.

"Ah, it's nothing," I answered without explaining the reason to her.

Not that there was a reason in the first place.

"…Did something happen?" she asked.

"Nope! Everything like always."

"I see. Nothing has changed."

"Yeah. Nothing has changed."

A lot had happened, but in the end nothing had really changed.

"Anyhow, did something happen to you?" I asked her this time around.

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, I'm just asking."

"Nothing. Everything is like always."

"Cool. Everything like always, eh?"

Shortly after, Saki started to close the shop and proposed, "Why don't you help me if you have nothing to do?"

"I shouldn't have to work today, though."

After making a feeble complaint, I joined her in tidying up.

Saki had started to sum up the day's revenues, just to close the register again because she was done in no time.

In the meantime, I locked the entrance and turned off the lights.

The shop became dark and was filled with an air of loneliness.

It was a well-known and irreplaceable view for me.

References

1. ↑ "早 " in Japanese, which makes for a really corny name. Could roughly be translated as "Maiden" and "Love song".

Chapter 4 - Secret

Everyone has their secrets.

But even though nobody wants theirs to be exposed, human nature has it that one is curious about other people's secrets—even more so if it's a secret of someone important to oneself.

However, the more important the person is, the less you should ignore their will and expose their secrets.

These are two contradicting urges that every person has to live with.

But if it were possible to learn those secrets without anybody to notice...

Who could resist the temptation to do so?

More importantly, could I resist the temptation to do so?

That morning I found an envelope in the mailbox of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. The sender was unknown, and the addressee was Saki Maino—me.

Since the postmark was missing, I assumed that the sender had put it into our mailbox himself, but I had no idea who else other than Tokiya and Towako-san would write a letter to me.

However, in their cases they would have just talked to me in person instead of going out of their ways to write a letter.

Therefore, I had not the slightest idea who the envelope was from.

I opened it and found a letter and a ring inside. After I had read the letter, I knew the identities of the sender and the ring.

The ring was a Relic; in the letter, the sender wrote about its powers and his wish for me to have it.

We had met each other just the other day. I remembered him as a kind person who loved his childhood friend so dearly that he rather wished for her happiness than his love to be requited.

I didn't know what happened to the two of them.

I only knew that nothing happened between Tokiya and the friend of this letter's issuer.

Still, I wanted to believe that he parted with Redtwine because he became so happy that he did no longer need it.

And if that wasn't the case … I wanted to pray for him to become happy. I wanted him to not only fulfill her wishes, but also his own.

However, I didn't wish so because I was a good person , but because I saw myself in them.

I was well aware that one's happiness is another's sadness—only too well.

And yet, I couldn't help wishing for everyone to be happy. So that one day, I would be able to believe that my decision had not been wrong … that my decision had contributed to a happy outcome.

Redtwine had the power to visualize the red strings of fate that connected people that were meant for each other. Apparently, that was all it could do.

He was not the kind that would tell lies, so I was certain that the ring was a genuine Relic. And judging by the fact that Tokiya and his friend didn't get together, there was no red string between the two.

I gathered that after finding that out, he decided to support his childhood friend in another way. While I didn't know what sort of decision he had made, I was glad that he didn't rely on a Relic for whatever he was up to.

As Towako-san often said, Relics only bring about harm. His Relic maybe seemed harmless, but that was no guarantee that it couldn't throw someone's life into disarray.

Redtwine lived up to its name and was made of entwined red strings. Because of its peculiar structure, it was tensile to a certain degree and probably fit around my finger without a problem.

My eyes fell on my little finger.

Who is my red string of fate tied to?

As I pondered about this question, a certain person's face crossed my mind.

I fiercely shook my head left and right, embarrassed by the fact that his face had come to mind as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

There was no guarantee that it was him.

Unlike me, he made many acquaintances and had a big social circle.

There was bound to be one girl or another in that circle who had a crush on him. Likewise, it was easily possible that he also had a crush on someone.

Working at the same place was nothing special; he spent a lot more time with his friends at school and also had more freedoms there.

I had been confronted with that truth just the other day.

He must be linked to another girl, I thought, and yet I found myself having faint hopes nonetheless.

I imagined how a string of fate went from my finger to his—and before I knew it, I had slipped Redtwine on my little finger.

W-What am I doing? Stupid! I exclaimed in thought and wanted to take the ring off, when suddenly—

"Hey, what's up? It's time to work."

The door to my room opened and Tokiya appeared from behind it.

Tokiya looked at me.

I looked at Tokiya.

We both averted our eyes—and his gaze fell on my left little finger, on Redtwine.

I quickly slid my left hand behind my back, but it was too late: Tokiya had seen the ring.

"Hey…"

"Don't mind it. It's just a ring," I explained half in a panic while pretending to be calm. Being expressionless was pretty handy in this case.

"What's the deal with that ring?"

Tokiya didn't let it pass.

He had probably seen right through the ring's nature because of his rich experience with Relics. Still, he didn't know whether or not Redtwine was one, so I could still talk my way out.

It was then that I noticed that I had left the letter and the envelope on the floor, and the letter contained a detailed description about Redtwine and its powers.

I leaped at them, picked them up and hid them in my arms.

"That letter…" he muttered.

"You're not allowed to read it."

"Ah, no… sorry, but… eh? That ring…?"

"It's just a present. Now get out."

I chased him out of my room and closed the door. Only after doing so I realized that I had blundered and held my head.

I had clearly been acting suspiciously; my agitation had shown in my behavior, which was not nearly as calm as usually.

Perhaps, Tokiya wouldn't have minded the letter so much if I hadn't concealed it in a hurry. My panicking had unwittingly turned his attention to the letter.

It was perfectly possible that he had been able to read some parts of it. If he knew that the ring was a Relic, he would surely start to wonder about its power.

If he were to find out that one could observe the red string of fate with Redtwine…

If he were to find out why I had put on Redtwine…

…I would be embarrassed.

"I must keep it a secret from him."

Tokiya may think that I'm an unfeeling and expressionless girl.

But I do have them too—those moments when I'm so embarrassed that I lose my composure.

For a while after I had been chased out of Saki's room, I just stood there before her door, dumbfounded.

Originally, I only wanted to call her to work, because she was late for once. Well, she wasn't exactly "late", since the shop hadn't opened yet, but usually she would show up downstairs at least ten minutes earlier and would make preparations that weren't even needed.

Anyway, today she was a bit late, so I came to call her and wondered what stopped her.

That was all well and good.

That was all well and good, but… Saki had been trying on a ring in her room, beholding it closely as though it was really important to her.

Once I entered, she started up and hid it.

And if that wasn't enough—a present, she said? Who from?

Does that mean that there's someone who would make her a present of a ring?

It wasn't Towako-san. I had caught a glimpse of the letter Saki received, but the handwriting was clearly that of a man. *But does she really know a guy who would write her a letter and put a ring into the envelope?*

I didn't know anything about her circle of friends. More precisely, I used to think such a thing didn't exist in the first place. I had been in the belief that her only friends were Towako-san and me.

However, I suddenly noticed something.

Not so long ago, Saki had become friends with a certain cat-loving child named Asami-chan behind my back. Looked at in that light, it was only natural for her

to have her own social network, even though she didn't go to school.

Come to think about it, didn't I catch her once chatting with a hairdresser?

Maybe she's frequenting that barber shop by now? Maybe she got the ring from that charismatic hairdresser even?

That's not so far-fetched—after all, she also got a lipstick back then and was eager to use it the very same day.

I want to know.

Who gave her that ring…?

It was then that Saki finished preparing herself and opened the door.

"You were still here?"

"Y-Yeah. I thought I'd wait since you wouldn't take too long."

While saying so, I sneaked a peek at Saki's left hand; there was no ring on her little finger anymore.

Does that mean that she doesn't bother wearing the ring all day long?

No wait, it might be the other way round. Maybe she avoids wearing the ring so that it won't get dirty or scratched…

"H-Hm? Did you take off your ring?" I tried sounding her out about it.

"Yes."

"C-Cool. I mean, that ring didn't really suit you anyway. With those strange string patterns."

Saki glared at me, "Don't talk about it anymore."

Oh, is she angry? Did I offend her?

That ring must be quite important to her if she's so offended at having it called 'strange'.

—Don't talk about it anymore.

I recalled Saki's words.

Does that mean that I'm not allowed to criticize her ring?

Still flabbergasted, I watched her go to work from behind.

That was a close call.

I risked being found out by Towako-san if Tokiya touched on the strange composition of the ring on the corridor, because it was about the time she would normally stand up.

Having witnessed many times how people ruined their lives because of Relics, Towako-san hated it when they were in circulation.

I, too, had put myself in danger multiple times because I was handling a Relic without sufficient care.

Redtwine might be a comparatively harmless Relic, but she would definitely not be pleased if she knew that I had tried out its power.

Besides, it seemed like Tokiya had become suspicious as well.

I had not only made the careless mistake of roughening my voice, but also that of tensing my face. He was going to become even more suspicious if I didn't remain calm in his eyes.

He did write that he wants me to have it, but I'll still give it to Towako-san once she's awake and Tokiya isn't looking.

After all, Tokiya would know that I've used Redtwine if he found out the truth, and I don't want to trouble Towako-san. Besides, it's embarrassing.

Even though I didn't expect him to sneak into my room, I decided to carry the ring around just in case.

I gently touched the ring inside my pocket and confirmed that I hadn't dropped it.

Saki had subconsciously put her hand in her pocket.

Once, Saki had scolded me for putting my hands in my pockets during work.

Looks like the ring's so dear to her that she can't help but keep touching it. Seriously, who gave her that ring?

"What's wrong, Tokiya? Your face is all screwed up," Towako-san asked as she walked in, awake at last.

Her beautiful black hair, which reached down to her waist, was still a mess. If she paid some attention to her appearance, I was pretty sure that the guys would come in flocks and give her one or another expensive ring.

I sneaked a peek at her fingers, but sure enough, she didn't wear a ring.

"Hm? Anything wrong with my fingers?" Towako-san asked with surprising accuracy upon tracing my gaze.

"On the contrary, I was just thinking that you don't wear a ring or anything."

"Hah?"

"Well, you see, I spotted Saki wearing one," I explained .

"That one you gave her?"

"No, it's not from me."

"Oh right, you gave her a pendant not a ring."

"Why do you know about that?!"

I had never told Towako-san about the pendant I'd given Saki. It was—how should I put this?—really just kind of a token of apology, or something.

Whoa, that doesn't matter now!

"You're doing it wrong, Tokiya; you gotta keep 'em going if you make her a present! By giving her a ring, for example."

"Yeah, maybe you're right…"

I guess Saki would have been happier about a ring than a pendant… and asked someone else for one because she didn't get one from me? It's hard to imagine her coaxing someone to

buy her a ring. No, it's hard to imagine because I've never seen her do something like that to me, but maybe she acts differently to other guys?

"Hm? Did something happen?" she asked, slightly let down by my boring answer.

Usually, I would have probably replied to her remark with something along the lines of "Why should I give her a ring?"

"As I said, Saki was wearing a ring."

"You sure she didn't buy it herself?"

"I doubt it. The ring's red."

Saki had a strong preference for black. While a pitch-black ring might be out of the question, she would probably go for a silver one with a black gem. If it was one without a gem, she would at least pick one with some black in it.

However, the ring was red. Therefore, it was very unlikely that she had bought it herself. The one who gave her the ring was probably not familiar with her preferences yet.

But despite its unfavorable color, Saki's eyes when she was looking at the ring had been filled with tenderness.

I gathered that its being a present was what delighted her.

"Heh, I wonder who gave it to her, then."

"You don't happen to have a hunch as to who it might be, Towako-san?"

"Oh? Are you curious?" Towako-san suddenly dropped her indifferent attitude and leaned forward with a naughty grin.

"I-I'm not curious! Just interested to know."

"So you *are* curious, eh?"

"No, it's just interest! Doesn't it make you curious who made her a present, Towako-san?"

"Well, it does, but Saki-chan's a teenager girl, too. It's a perfectly normal thing at her age, isn't it?"

"No, not at all. In her case," I denied.

"I seem to remember that you've had some fun, too."

"Ugh…"

For some reason, the incident that happened the other day had gotten through to Towako-san. Lately, she was busy teasing me for taking a day off just to go on a date, all on the false pretext of having school work to do.

"But you can't deny that Saki doesn't have the right connections for that, can you?"

"Maybe she hit it off with a customer?"

"A customer? When do we get any customers?"

"Are you picking a fight with me, eh?"

My tongue may have slipped, but I was serious. Saki could indeed be called the face of our shop, but since we didn't have any regular customers, the possibility that Towako-san portrayed was unlikely.

"Believe it or not, but we do get customers in the afternoons on workdays! Well, not every day, and they hardly buy anything…"

"On workday afternoons…"

I had never been on shift at those times, nor had I ever thought about what she was doing during the week here.

"Well, that was only an example, but it's true that there are some regular customers, even during the weekend and in the evenings. I don't know about you, but Saki remembers every one of our customers."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just the other day, she ran across one of them in town and greeted him. Well… she scared the shit out of him with her deadpan, though. Hahaha!"

I hadn't paid attention to it so far, but it seemed like there were customers who looked her in *that* light.

I was taken aback; I hadn't thought that anyone would dare come again after being attended to by Saki.

"See? You're curious after all."

"N-No, I'm not, really."

"Look how he's trying to hide it."

"I'm not hiding anything! It don't care who she gets rings and stuff from!"

"Then would please you stop wasting your working time on discussing it?" a cold voice suddenly said from behind and sent a cold shiver down my spine.

Saki glared at me—glared not stared—and returned to the counter, expressionless as ever.

"Ouch, that was some ridiculously poor timing. Why don't you just admit that you're curious and ask her directly?"

"But it's really not like that."

Yes, it is like that.

Damn… I just made it harder for me to ask.

Oh no, it has just become harder for me to speak to her about it.

I was too late. How careless of me not to notice that Towako-san has gotten up.

I was still safe because they didn't know of the ring's being a Relic, but if they did, they would at the same time also realize that I had actually put on Redtwine.

Therefore, I could not tell Towako-san about Redtwine anymore.

Tokiya pretended "not to care" about the ring, but it was obvious that he suspected it to be a Relic—and his hunch is right.

But that's unfair of you, Tokiya! Consulting Towako-san about your suspicions is cheating!

Is he afraid that I might abuse the Relic, perhaps?

But if it had actually been dangerous, I would have given it to Towako-san right away. In fact, I had originally planned to do so.

I did understand why he would doubt me, though, since I had accidentally troubled him with strange Relics often enough.

What should I only do now?

I could not simply dispose of it, but I couldn't keep it, either, because Towako-san might discover it by chance.

I know, I'll just put it in an envelope addressed to Towako-san and place it into our mailbox.

No, that will not do. If Towako-san showed the ring to Tokiya, he would recognize it and could tell that the letter was from me. That also rules out the idea of leaving the ring somewhere and waiting for her to pick it up.

What should I do…?

…I know, I'll just stow it away in the storage room.

In this house there was an underground storage room where we kept the real Relics. I could simply sneak into it and leave the ring there. I didn't run the risk of being found out by Tokiya, either, because neither of us was allowed to enter the storage room.

The biggest problem was getting ahold of the key, but luckily I knew where it could be found.

Therefore, the only obstacle left was not getting caught by Towako-san.

"That aside…"

We had already had a whole 3 customers that day.

That was perfectly fine—a flourishing business was by no means a bad thing. Admittedly, none of them had bought anything, but having them come was a big step ahead.

However, I couldn't help wondering why Tokiya had studied them closely instead of treating them indifferently like he would usually do. He was almost glaring at them.

Is he trying to mimic me, perhaps?

How rude! I don't glare at my customers!

Whatever, I have some business to take care of right now. Let's go to the storage room.

Whatever, let's go to the storage room.

It was too late to ask Saki up front about the ring, so I had to feel her out in secret, and there was a certain Relic in the storage room that would help me with that.

Right, I was thinking of Mind's Voice, the Relic that gave its user access to others' inner voices.

If I can't ask her directly, I have no other choice but to listen to her inner voice—that was the conclusion I had arrived at .

The problem was that we were forbidden access to the storage room. I was in for a good scolding if I got caught by Towako-san. Not only that: I'd also anger Saki if she found out that I'd used Mind's Voice on her.

As soon as work was over, I went to the living room and left the cleaning up to Saki.

Towako-san was not there at the moment; I assumed she had returned to her room.

I knew the hiding place of the key: she kept it in the back of the topmost drawer on the left side of the dresser they had in the living room.

I scrutinized the drawer for the key, all the while focusing all my senses on my surroundings in order to detect Saki and Towako-san.

"Found it."

After I had obtained the key, I instantly shut the drawer and headed toward the storage room, pretending it was the most natural thing to do.

Not too long ago we had dealt with a fake ghost in the basement, but I had nothing to fear today. Save for the risk of Saki or Towako-san turning up maybe.

There was no time to spare.

I speeded up and arrived at the door to the basement. Using the key I had found, I unlocked the door and slid into the storage room, and turned the lights on.

The room was cramped with all kinds of familiar and unfamiliar Relics alike. That mess supported my

suspicion of Towako-san having no talent for keeping order.

Mind's Voice was an earring shaped like a ripple. Since it was a very small Relic, it was most likely stored in the cupboard by the wall.

That being said, it was also possible for the cupboard to be a Relic of its own. I wasn't quite sure if it was safe to touch it, but time was running out.

Shaking off my hesitation, I pulled open all drawers and searched them for Mind's Voice.

I remembered its shape. Carefully but swiftly, I scrutinized one after another.

"Found it!"

After I had found Mind's Voice, I slipped it into my pocket, hurried out of the storage room and locked the door.

"Whew," I sighed as I brushed the dust off my clothes and confirmed the earring was still in my pocket.

Good, it's there. So far so good.

Now I only need to get Mind's Voice out of here without anyone noticing.

Now I only need to get Redtwine in there without anyone noticing.

After fetching the spare key out of the topmost drawer on the right side of the dresser we had in the living room, I headed down to the basement. Incidentally, the main key was hidden on the left side.

Not too long ago we had dealt with a fake ghost in the basement, but today I was fearless. If anything, I feared that Tokiya or Towako-san might walk in on me.

There was no time to spare.

If someone caught me, I could just say I were cleaning up since the room was a mess last we came here. That being said, I hoped not to run across anyone.

On my way down to the basement, however, I bumped into something.

I barely managed to suppress a scream of terror, but when looked ahead I had to scream for another reason.

"Tokiya?"

"Saki?"

Why is Tokiya here? This is bad… he is going to question me about why I have come here. I must evade that somehow.

"W-What are you doing down here, Tokiya?"

No, what am I doing! I exclaimed internally as I unwittingly touched on the matter myself. *Calm down, girl. Keep a level head and don't let on anything!*

"O-Oh, um, I just thought I'd clean up the basement, you know?" he answered.

"The basement?"

"Ah, only the corridor of course! Not the room itself. Because it was quite messy the other day."

"What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing."

"Oh, uh, really?"

"Naturally I had no plans of going inside, either, so I do not carry the key around with me. If you doubt me, go look into the dresser."

Oh why only do I keep digging my own grave…? He is going to notice that the spare key is missing.

"The, uh, key? The key to the storage room, you mean ? N-No, it's okay! I totally believe you! N-No one would want to go inside that room, right?"

"You are right, there's no need to look. No one would think about going inside there."

"But we don't want to give Towako-san the wrong idea, so shall we go back upstairs?"

"Yes, you are right. Let's go back upstairs."

How careless of me. I didn't consider the possibility of Tokiya cleaning up.

But how should I have known?

Why couldn't he choose another day to turn so strangely hardworking?

At any rate, because Tokiya had already cleaned up, I had no longer an excuse to go to the basement. While I could still come up with another one, going down there twice a day was very suspicious.

What to do now with Redtwine?

What to do now with Mind's Voice?

Back home, I was seriously considering what to do about the Relic I had placed in front of me.

While I had indeed succeeded at taking it with me, I couldn't quite bring myself to actually use it and peep into Saki's heart without her permission.

Is it really okay to eavesdrop on her like that…? Shouldn't I put it back into the storage room?

But that would mean a waste of effort.

Besides, this Relic isn't dangerous and I'm not trying to "abuse" it.

I just want to know who gave Saki that ring, that's all.

In fact, I could just as well ask her directly. I could, but I don't want to because I said that I didn't care in front of her.

Why not take the easier way if I'm going to learn the truth from her anyway?

But if Saki was really happy about that ring…

what would I do then?

Nothing special.

I would congratulate her. That's all. I would tell her that the ring suits her. That's all.

I don't have the right to tell her to take it off.

No, it's not like I wish for her to take that ring off to begin with.

That's not why I am doing this.

But then why am I doing this?

What am I going to do after I found out the identity of the guy who sent her that ring?

I see… I must have subconsciously suspected that ring to be a Relic! It would be a catastrophe if it was a Relic and Saki didn't know, after all!

If she's gotten herself into trouble again, then I'm only helping her by looking closer into the matter.

Right. It's all for her sake.

As I persuaded myself like that, I took Mind's Voice and—stuck it into my ear.

"OUCH!" I yelled as an intense pain literally pierced through me.

Struggling against the pain, I writhed around in my apartment.

I, I didn't know piercings hurt that much…

As someone who had zero knowledge of piercings, I had underestimated the pain it caused. Since it hardly hurt when I squeezed my earlobe, I had been in the belief that lobes weren't sensitive to pain and a needle would thus no hurt so much.

But thinking again about it, it was obvious that piercing through an earlobe *had* to be painful. I was amazed that so many people all over the world were willing to suffer so much just to be fashionable.

After wiping the blood off my hands with some tissues , I fetched a band-aid and put it on the wound.

It was a perfect disguise for the piercing.

There was still a stinging pain in my ear, but I was sure it would subside before long. Besides, I was actually grateful if I considered it a punishment for peeping into Saki's heart.

As I was pricked by my conscience, I kept telling myself:

I'm not doing this for my own sake!

I'm not doing this for my own sake.

I was absolutely not checking my red string of fate for my own sake.

No one would want to be linked to a girl like me through fate.

Just like the boy who'd entrusted me with Redtwine, I was going to put myself in the position of the other party and make sure he can be happy by telling him:

"No, you shouldn't bother with me!"

That was the only reason why I wanted to find out where my red string led to!

—However, I still hesitated to put on Redtwine.

I couldn't get the image out of my mind that a red string went from my little finger to Tokiya's.

If that was really the case… would I be able to say the words to him?

"No, you shouldn't bother with me!"

Would I be able to say that to him?

And the opposite image, too, wouldn't go out of my head, making me imagine how a red string went from my little finger to that of a stranger.

What would I think if that was the case? Would I be able to accept that fate?

And there was one more thing that I couldn't help imagining.

The image of a red string that went from Tokiya's little finger to that of another girl.

Another girl—a girl other than me.

Tokiya and I weren't in that kind of relationship. We didn't wish to be, either, although neither of us had clearly said so.

What I *could* say, however, was that I hoped for us to stay as we were.

I hoped that we could still spend much time here at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, just by the three of us—Towako-san, Tokiya, and me.

However, Redtwine was able to teach me what was going to "be".

Perhaps, I could still change our fate.

But perhaps, I could not.

I couldn't shake off the fear that I would destroy something important by looking at my, and Tokiya's, red string.

On the other hand, there was also an urge to know.

What if my red string of fate was linked to Tokiya…?

What if my red string of fate was linked to someone else…?

What if Tokiya's red string of fate was linked to someone else…?

How would I react?

Having worn Mind's Voice all day, I had gotten the knack of it.

For example, I noticed that teachers tend to think about the solution when they pick someone in class. When I was told to answer a problem, I just had to trace the teacher's thoughts through Mind's Voice and I was okay.

For another example, one of my buddies asked me what we should grab for lunch, and said he didn't care when I asked him what he felt like eating. But in truth, he wanted to grab a sandwich from the school's snack bar because he was broke, so I proposed to go there and made him happy.

In other words, you could not limitlessly poke around in someone's heart but only got to hear what the other party was thinking at the moment.

In fact, that was a weight off my shoulders.

I had no notion of revealing everything that was going on inside Saki's head. All I wanted to know was who gave her that ring, and how she felt about receiving it.

That being said, I was impressed at how useful Mind's Voice really was. I could see why someone wouldn't want to let go of it.

At the same time, I also became aware of how venomous Relics were to the human heart; the longer you have a Relic, the harder it becomes to part with it.

Therefore I wanted to get it over with as fast as possible.

Besides, the dull pain in my ear was getting unbearable. The hole I had made into my earlobe was still aching.

I just wanted to take it off already.

After classes, I headed to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

The first thing I did upon entering the shop was checking Saki's left hand.

She wasn't wearing the ring today, either.

Is she carrying it around in her pocket, after all? Or has she taken it off before I arrived here?

Suddenly, I noticed that Saki was staring at me.

"W-What is it?"

"What happened to your ear?"

D-Did she see through me? I thought, slightly panicking, and unwittingly touched my ear. "Ouch!" I hissed as a pain ran through my ear.

"Are you hurt?"

"Y-Yeah, scratched it open a bit by accident."

I had answered the same question at school; I pretended that it was a scratch. No one got suspicious thanks to the band-aid.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Your blood is soaking through the band-aid. Do you want to replace it with a new one?"

"No, I'm okay, really!"

—Is it really safe to believe him? Tokiya always keeps silent when he's suffering.

As Saki spoke, I could also hear her inner voice.

I wasn't suffering, but because I realized that I was worrying her, my pangs of conscience just got stronger.

I should really hurry up and get it over with.

At this rate I'm going to pick up things I don't need to hear.

After retracing the scenario I had come up with last night, I started talking in a casual manner.

"Not wearing that ring today?"

She obviously didn't want to touch on the matter; she turned to me with a face even more lacking expression than usual.

"No, I'm not."

*—So he **is** suspicious of the ring.*

Again, I heard her inner voice.

"Ah, well, you know, remember how I told you that it didn't suit you? I was just thinking that maybe you've taken the ring off because I said that."

"That's not it. I don't wear the ring because there's simply no reason to."

—Is he sounding me out on the ring?

"Do you wear it on only when you're not at work?"

"No, I haven't worn the ring after that. It only put it on by accident when you watched."

—Although that's not true.

My surprise at what her inner voice said almost showed on my face.

Saki was lying after all. That implied that she was wearing the ring sometimes when I was not watching.

Maybe only puts it on when she meets up with the one who gave it to her?

Stop. I mustn't waste time on irrelevant thoughts.

Okay, the real fight starts now.

With this conversation I steered her attention to her ring.

Now I only had to say the right words so that she would start thinking about the sender.

If she told me directly, I could listen to her real voice.

If she beat around the bush or lied, I could listen to her inner voice.

While hiding my intentions, I continued talking in a casual manner.

"Wasn't that quite a special ring, though? Kind of gives away the personality of the buyer, no?"

"The personality of the buyer…?"

—I don't know his name, but he has a kind heart that allows him wishes for someone else's happiness rather than his own.

If she doesn't know his name, does that mean it's really one of our customers?

That was not that important, though.

Judging by her thoughts, the guy was kind and cared about Saki above all. It was the sort of man who treated everyone equally—even Saki, who would usually scare off all our customers with her poker face.

That was probably what had drawn Saki to him.

But that was okay.

I only wanted to know.

I did not wish for more.

I did not feel like keep asking her about it.

If the guy who had given her the ring was like that, I had no objections. Although that did not in the least disperse the tingling sensation in my stomach…

"You seem to be very curious about my ring, Tokiya…"

"No, it's okay. I only wanted to know what kind of person gave it to you, but if he's kind, then that's okay," I squeezed out with a tongue that didn't move as I wanted.

"…How do you know that he is a kind person?"

Crap! She only said that with her inner voice!

"Ah, no, I…"

Saki stared closely at me and suddenly walked straight up to me. While I stood still and could only watch, she stopped before me and tore off the band-aid on my ear.

"Ouch!"

Saki crumpled the band-aid in her fist and looked me straight in my eyes.

"That's Mind's Voice, isn't it?"

"……"

"What's the meaning of this?"

"……"

"—Were you spying on me with that thing?"

I couldn't her Saki's inner voice.

She must be speaking faster than she can think.

She must be so angry that she can't keep a cool head.

"Jerk."

Saki slapped my face.

I was shaken. So much that I got rough with Tokiya.

I knew he doubted me. He had suspected that I was hiding a Relic ever since he saw me with Redtwine.

And that was true; he had the right to confront me with that.

But the means he resorted to were downright heartless .

As a matter of fact, I had attempted to study our fates using Redtwine. The evening before I had even wavered to give it another try, but in the end I'd decided otherwise.

Certainly, I was too afraid; but more importantly, I thought it was wrong to spy on his fate like that.

And yet, Tokiya had done something similar and violated my privacy. I still couldn't believe that he had spied on my heart using Mind's Voice instead of asking me directly.

I admitted that I had dodged his questions. I admitted that I should have been more honest to him.

However.

Had Tokiya asked me about it because he was honestly worried about me, then I would have also given him a proper answer. I would have told him about the Relic and explained to him that I didn't mean to abuse it.

Had Tokiya told me to part with it because he was honestly worried about me, then I would have also listened to him. I had no attachment to Redtwine. I could have given it to Towako-san anytime.

However, Tokiya did neither.

He chose to be unfair.

He peeped into my heart.

Had he seen it when he walked in on me?

Had he heard it when he walked in on me…?

—Why I wanted to use this Relic.

—And what I wanted to do with Redtwine.

If he had… if he knew the answers to these questions...

Then I didn't even want to see his face anymore for a while.

Because… because I was so…

…embarrassed.

It had been quite a while since I'd last loathed myself so much.

After that incident, I ditched work and immediately left the shop, and wandered around aimlessly until I had cooled down a bit.

Man…

I felt like this was the first time in days that I had a cool head.

What was wrong with me?

Apparently, I had been a bit off my head ever since I'd seen her wearing that unfamiliar ring.

At last, I realized how much of a jerk I was; there was simply no justification for spying on someone's heart.

Opinions differed on the question whether or not it was okay to take a look at someone else's cell phone or their diary, but in this case there was no approving of it.

My cheek still hurt.

Despite that, the pain did not alleviate my pangs of remorse in the slightest.

Really, what was wrong with me?

Why have I lost my composure so much when it was just her getting a ring from some unknown guy?

In the past, I wouldn't have reacted that way.

In the past, I would have asked her flat out.

In the past, I wouldn't have been so stupid.

Just when did I become like this…?

Why have I become like this…?

But I can still ponder about the reason later.

For now, I need to apologize to Saki.

Waiting for the time when the shop closed, I returned to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

Saki's expression didn't change a bit when she saw me enter. Even worse, she averted her eyes and just continued tidying up.

It was evident that she was avoiding me.

This hurt, but it also made me realize just how much I had hurt her. I feared that she couldn't stand me anymore.

But you reap what you sow. I was in no position to be hurt myself.

I took heart and spoke to Saki once more.

"I want to talk."

Saki suspended her work but kept her face averted.

She seemed to be furious at me; even from here could I see that her face had turned red. Saki's eternal poker face had!

"Saki…"

After taking a deep breath—a sigh most likely—she finally raised her head and responded to me.

"What?" she asked, looking me straight in my eyes, but then moving her gaze slightly to the side.

"Don't worry, I took it off."

After I had said so, I reached out for my earlobe to stress the fact that I had taken off Mind's Voice—

At once, Saki's face distorted.

"Silly! What's up with that?!"

"Huh?"

"Come over here!" she commanded as she grabbed my arm, upon which she pulled me into the living room and

had me sit down. She then went into the kitchen and searched for something.

"Excuse me, but could you explain—"

"Not now."

"But I want to apo…"

Saki came back carrying a box and some ice, and stood in front of me, while I was still sitting properly as she had told me.

"Don't move," she said as she placed her hands on my cheeks to stop me from moving.

Itching to apologize to her, I tried to take her hands off , when suddenly my face contorted with a stinging pain. I noticed that I had unwittingly touched my ear and finally understood the situation I was in.

My ear was the reason for the dull pain that had been tormenting me. I had misinterpreted it as pangs of remorse accompanying the pain from her smacking me.

"It's swollen badly. You didn't disinfect the wound, did you?"

Apparently, the hole I had opened by putting on Mind's Voice had festered. Afterward, she told me that there were special tools for opening piercing holes and that it was best to consult a professional.

I got just what I deserved.

"I can't properly disinfect your wound like this. Lie down."

Allowing no ifs and buts, Saki held my head and pushed me down.

My head landed on something soft.

I was terribly embarrassed when I noticed that my head was lying on her lap, but luckily I didn't run the risk of being noticed because my face was looking away from her and my ear was already red for another reason.

After she had distributed disinfectant on the wound, she put gauze on my ear.

It stung a lot, but since it was all my own fault, I clenched my teeth and endured the pain.

In the end, Saki softly placed some ice wrapped in a towel on my ear to cool it down.

"Stay put for a while."

I had no other choice but to do as she said and stay like this.

The ticking of the clock was the only sound around us.

Slowly but surely, my ear grew numb and the pain subsided—and with it my agitation.

"I'm sorry, Saki," I apologized with my back still turned to her.

She let out a small sigh and replied, "I haven't forgiven you yet."

"I don't think that you've forgiven me already, either."

Some more time cloaked in silence passed.

At last, after another sigh, Saki slowly began to talk.

"Your doubts were justified. The ring really is a Relic."

"Huh?"

"Its name is Redtwine. You can observe the red strings of fate if you put it on your finger. Do you remember the girl that approached you the other day? The ring belonged to a close friend of hers. We hardly talked, but for some reason he decided to entrust me with it. Perhaps he noticed that we sell fake Relics here."

What is she talking about? Is it just me or do I not know any of this?

"…Also, I didn't mean to abuse it for my own sake."

"……"

"…I just… put it on without thinking too much about it."

"……"

"…Just so that you know. Because I don't know what you heard through Mind's Voice."

"……"

"…So, it's not like… it's not like I was curious who's meant to be together with me," she muttered with a fading voice, all the while confusing me.

"Um, but wasn't that ring a present?" I asked.

"A present? Well, I suppose you could call it a 'present' because I received it from someone… but don't worry, I will give it to Towako-san afterward. I planned to so anyway."

"…haha…hahahaha!"

I could no longer help but laugh. Unable to hold it back anymore and still resting my head on Saki's lap, I held my sides and continued to laugh.

"Hey, stop that Tokiya. That tickles," she complained, but that didn't stop me from laughing on.

It had all been a misunderstanding on my part.

Saki hadn't received a present; the ring only seemed so precious to her because she had been entrusted with it by someone.

While there were still a few points that I didn't quite understand, I was content with just knowing that much. I didn't really care about the rest.

"Are you happy now?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"That's what you wanted to know so badly, isn't it? After all, you used Mind's Voice just to find out about Redtwine's power and my plans with it. But you must believe me that I wasn't interested in its capabilities! Honestly!"

"No, that's not what I wanted to know."

"Eh? What did you want to know, then?"

"In truth, I wanted to know who gave you that ring… no, only whether or not you were delighted by it."

"Huh? Why would you want to ask such a thing?"

"Because of reasons."

Saki fell silent, apparently not understanding what I am getting at.

"Listen, this is an 'if,' okay?" I started talking in a casual manner to fill the gap and forestall any questions, giving my best to appear calm.

"*If* you want a ring, don't go to someone else but come ask me for one, okay?"

Saki remained entirely reactionless for a while.

I just said something real embarrassing, didn't I?

After a somewhat unsettling silence, she replied:

"How would you feel if I really wore a ring that I received from someone else as a present?"

"……"

I took advantage of the fact that Saki didn't have Mind's Voice and invoked my right to silence.

Tokiya may not have said anything in response, but I could hear what he answered in his heart. So clearly that for a moment I thought I was wearing Mind's Voice on my ear.

But I didn't need Mind's Voice in order to know what Tokiya was thinking.

That's why I—

"Saki, did you just…?"

"Hey now."

Tokiya had turned his head to look up, so I grabbed it and turned it to the side again.

"Saki, did you just smile…?"

"No, I didn't."

"But…"

"I'm angry at you! Do you want to spy on me again?"

"Ah, no, I'm sorry," he apologized and obediently let me turn his head to the side.

I wasn't sure of it myself, but perhaps I had been smiling just now.

That was close.

If he had either seen my face or was still using Mind's Voice, he would have certainly realized…

Originally, I didn't plan to forgive him anytime soon.

But after learning that Tokiya was worried about me…

After learning that he was shaken by the thought that someone else made me a present…

After realizing that he had probably been jealous…

I had already forgiven him, and he would have almost realized that.

But I was not going to tell him.

I was not going to tell him that he was already forgiven.

I'm usually the one who is making a fool of herself. It feels good that he's getting that role for a change.

It's kind of fun to see Tokiya act like he did today, and somehow makes me happy.

Because such mischievous thoughts had been born inside me, I was not going to tell him the truth.

He has to show some more reflection on his behavior.

I don't change my expression, so I'm sure he hasn't noticed that I already forgave him—

But one thing I'm willing to say. I'll respond to his little request.

"I suppose I'll do as you say, Tokiya."

I'm sure she hasn't noticed why I was so shaken—

Because I didn't know the reason myself.

I didn't know why I had been so beside myself.

I didn't know why I had been so shocked by her getting a present.

But to be honest, I didn't care anymore.

Perhaps, I would find out if I kept pondering over it, but I gave up doing so.

Right now, all I wanted was to leave the thinking for a rainy day and wallow in these feelings of relief.

Right, I was relieved.

Not because I had learned that the ring was no present , and not because I had learned that she wasn't particularly happy about the ring.

The single biggest reason for my relief was that Saki had forgiven me for acting so foolishly.

It required no words, no expression on her face—I could tell nonetheless.

Anyone else could certainly not tell, but I could, even without Mind's Voice.

Right, I and only I could tell that she had in truth forgiven me.

Slowly but surely, I grew sleepier and sleepier, all the while feeling blissful relief in my heart, comforting warmth on my cheek, and Saki's soft hand stroking my head.

Having slept no wink the night before due to anxieties, I stood no chance against the sleepiness that was sinking through me.

Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep.

Therefore, I didn't hear Saki's final words.

I had a feeling that she said something important, but I didn't understand her.

—What was it that she said at the end?

Afterword

Tsukumodo Antique Shop has made it to the fourth volume.

I'm happy that I could at last bring you the latest volume despite the gap to the previous one. Good news, indeed!

Speaking of good news, my sister has brought a child into the world the other day. That officially makes me an "uncle." But you wouldn't believe how incredibly cute my niece is! I stand no chance in the face of her loveliness .

Will my niece ever read my books once she can read? I will definitely cling myself to this job until the time comes!

All right, now that I have made a nice resolve, let's begin with the introduction of this time's chapters.

Shadow

Tokiya meets again a former classmate, but he hardly remembers her. A certain phial that dims one's presence seems to be involved...

Writing this chapter took quite some doing, and it ended up as an entirely different story than originally envisioned, but I'm pretty happy with it.

I originally planned to put some more weight on the introductory ghost story and Saki's unexpectedly *imid personality, but in the end I decided to leave it at that to maintain a good balance. It's a secret pleasure of mine to reveal bits of Saki's hidden traits as the story goes on, as I did in the cat chapter in volume 3.

Gamble

Tokiya springs the opponent's trap and is coerced into a poker game with a certain invaluable price at stake. What he doesn't know is that his opponent possesses a Relic...

I don't play horse races, cycle races, or boat races, nor do I buy lottery tickets. Well, as a soccer enthusiast, I do buy toto tickets every once in a while, with the faint hope

of hitting the jackpot. I don't seem to have as much luck as Tokiya, though. I suppose I'll have to live a humble life.

Pinky

There is a Relic that visualizes the red string of fate and lets its user retie it. One day, a certain girl makes a fateful encounter with Tokiya and falls in love with him, while her childhood friend watches over her. But what does Saki think of all this...?

Believe it or not, but this was supposed to become a romantic novel.

Secret

Saki receives an envelope with a letter and a ring, which she tries on. Walking in on her, Tokiya spots this scene and...

It's a story of misunderstandings as always, but this time Tokiya is the one who finds himself in confusion.

Those are the chapters this time around. I hope you enjoy them.

All right, I would like to give my thanks to a few people at this occasion.

Thanks to Takabayashi-san for his work as my editor, Takeshima Satoshi for his magnificent Relic designs, all the people who made this book possible, and last but not least, my readers for buying this book.

Thank you so much, and until the next time!

Akihiko Odou